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Mary Perry Smith

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARY PERRY SMITH, CO-FOUNDER OF MESA

Interviews conducted by
Nadine Wilmot
in 2002

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Mary Perry Smith, photo taken in the garden of the Oakland Museum of California, 2002.

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INTERVIEW HISTORY—Mary Perry Smith

I approached Mary Perry Smith about being interviewed by the Regional Oral History Office while interviewing her husband, Dr. Norvel Smith, in July of 2002. She responded to my invitation by saying, "Anything for MESA." Mrs. Perry Smith is a fiercely committed educator who was an advocate for young people of color both at the local level as a high school teacher, and statewide as co-founder of the Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement program (MESA). MESA is a highly successful pre-college student development program, with strong institutional ties to the University of California, for whom it is a major channel of outreach. Mrs. Perry Smith is also a key figure in East Bay cultural institutions with her longtime involvement the Oakland Museum of California and the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame.

This interview offers some insight into Mrs. Perry Smith's commitment and philosophy with regard to education and community involvement. For anyone with an interest in learning more about MESA, I recommend *The MESA Way:A Success Story of Nurturing Minorities for Math/Science Based Careers,* by Wilbur H. Somerton, Mary Perry Smith, Robert Finnell, and Ted W. Fuller, which tells the story of MESA's beginning, early development, and expansion into a statewide program that is now duplicated nationally. Despite receiving national acclaim, MESA is seriously threatened by Governor Schwarzenegger's mid-year budget, which cuts all funding to UC outreach programs in January 2004. You can learn more about MESA at http://mesa/ucop.edu .

We met three times to create this interview in October and November of 2002 at Mrs. Perry Smith's home in the Oakland hills. The interview was recorded on minidisc, then transcribed and lightly edited. It was reviewed by Mrs. Perry Smith for accuracy.

Mary Perry Smith was interviewed as part of the African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project because of the key role she played in MESA, in order to explore the broader history of the University of California and its commitment to access and diversity.

This series is grounded in the premise that higher education is one of the primary strategies for gaining social equality--access to employment and income--for historically disadvantaged communities. Moreover, the university, comprised of its students and faculty and administration, with all of its intellectual and financial resources, operates as a critical touchstone in processes of systemic social change. Therefore the university functions not simply as an educational institution, but also as a significant site of historic and future potential for imagining and crafting opportunity for ethnic and racial groups formerly excluded from higher education. This project recognizes that the University of California, as California's premier public educational institution, plays a significant role in the socio-economic mobility of all of California's residents. The story that we hope will emerge from this project is a story of California – its people and one of its most important public institutions.

The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through recorded oral memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in the Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Nadine Wilmot, Editor/Interviewer
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
December, 2003

INTERVIEW 1: OCTOBER 30, 2002
[Minidisc 1]

01-00:00:00
Wilmot: October the thirtieth. Mary Perry Smith. Interview one.

I guess I just wanted to start by asking you that basic question of when and where were you born?

01-00:00:20
Smith: I was born in Evansville, Indiana, in 1926 on May 29. My father was the minister of the AME church in Evansville. When I was six months old, the bishop moved him to Kokomo. When I was five years old, the bishop moved him to Logansport. So, I started kindergarten in Logansport.

01-00:00:54
Wilmot: Indiana still?

01-00:00:56
Smith: All Indiana. I think we were in Logansport through grade three, and then we moved to Anderson. I finished elementary school in Anderson, Indiana, enrolled in junior high school, and after the first six weeks, the bishop moved him again—always. Conference was in October, so we always moved at the beginning of the school year after we had enrolled in another school. So, we moved to Crawfordsville, and I had my junior high school and high school education in Crawfordsville through my junior year. And then my senior year, the bishop moved us to Frankfort, Indiana. So, I finished high school, my senior year, in Frankfort, Indiana.

I was one of six children. I'm the oldest girl. I have three older brothers. I have a younger sister and a younger brother. So, there are six of us. All of us are still alive in various stages of good health. Various stages of health, but we're all alive. I have a brother and sister still living in Indiana. They were both teachers. I have a brother who's retired to Florida, and he was a teacher and an AME minister—African Methodist Episcopal church, which is the church my father pastored, and his father. My sister was a teacher, first grade, for forty years. My youngest brother broke the mold and became a mathematician. He came to California in 1952 in the army and stayed and went to Cal and San Francisco State. Then, he went to work for Caltrans as a mathematician. He just retired about three years ago.

01-00:03:33
Wilmot: So, he's in the Bay Area?

01-00:03:35
Smith: In Sacramento. He moved to Sacramento. So, that's my immediate family background. I'm part of a very large family because my mother was one of nine children. My father was one of nine children. So, we come from a very large family.

01-00:03:58
Wilmot: Indiana-based?

01-00:04:01

Smith: Alabama-based. My mother's father was the first chaplain at Tuskegee Institute. He was there with Booker T. Washington. I found out years later, after I was teaching, that Grandfather Whittaker had taught math and logic at Tuskegee all those years. All of my mother's family, and she went to Tuskegee. My father's parents were both born in slavery. When slavery was over, they were teenagers. And they met and got married somehow—I'm not sure how. They were farmers. They bought land in Alabama and farmed. I guess, for a while, they farmed over five hundred acres and they hired a lot of ex-slaves. My grandfather Perry was an AME minister, and my grandmother was a midwife. So, she would travel around the countryside and help women with birthing and teach them good sanitary and health methods. Most of the people she worked with were ex-slaves. I guess all of them, at that time, because they were in Alabama. But on my mother's side, I found out that my grandmother was also a midwife and did much of the same thing, out of Tuskegee. But all of my father's family also went to Tuskegee. So it was one of the times that he was at Tuskegee that he met my mother. When she finished Tuskegee, she went to Hampton Institute, which is quite interesting because Booker T. Washington had gone to Hampton. Evidently, a lot of the Tuskegee graduates went to Hampton to complete their education. After she finished Hampton, she taught in Virginia for a while, until she got married. All of my aunts and uncles are dead, and our parents are dead. My brothers and sisters are the oldest living relatives on my father's side. I have older cousins on my mother's side.

01-00:06:56

Wilmot: Will you tell me your parents' names?

01-00:06:58

Smith: My mother was Annie Nelson Whittaker, and my father was Henry Perry—Henry Allen Perry.

01-00:07:08

Wilmot: You mentioned that you had midwifery in your family from both sides. I'm wondering if your grandmother kept a record of her work.

01-00:07:24

Smith: I have no idea. It was only recently in reading the statement by one of my oldest cousins, a statement about my maternal grandfather, which she had left with her children—that I found out that Grandmother was a midwife. So, I don't know. The army hospital for veterans was at Tuskegee. Two of my aunts, my mother's youngest sisters, worked in the veterans' hospital there. A lot of people in Tuskegee worked at the veterans' hospital there. Nurses, and doctors, and orderlies and all that kind of thing. I don't know whether that had anything to do with my grandmother's being a midwife. I'm certain not my father's mother. She could not read. I think my father's parents were just dedicated people, helping their community in very difficult times. They'd bought an old plantation house. They started out as itinerant workers—farmers, and then they saved their money and bought a house and land. It's wonderful to learn about them. Now I don't know who to ask. I remember my grandmother on my mother's side and my grandfather. My maternal grandfather was also born a slave in Georgia. My maternal grandmother was born free in Hartford, Connecticut. When my grandfather was free, he went to Atlanta U, and then he went to the seminary in Hartford, Connecticut. He was a Congregationalist minister. He pastored in a lot of different places—one of them New Orleans. Happens that he had pastored the church

where Andy Young's father was—my mother was born in New Orleans while he was there. Grandfather went to Tuskegee—Booker T. Washington asked him to come to Tuskegee to be the chaplain. He was there for a while and then he went off and did more pastoring and then he came back and stayed. He died in 1936, so I had a chance to know him. But my father's parents were older—his mother died in 1915.

01-00:10:41
Wilmot: So you didn't have the chance to know them?

01-00:10:43
Smith: No.

01-00:10:45
Wilmot: It sounds like you spent the most amount of time in Crawfordsville, growing up. Is that correct?

01-00:10:55
Smith: Five years, yes.

01-00:10:57
Wilmot: It sounds like that was the place that was maybe not the most home but was the place where you were the longest. What type of community was it?

01-00:11:06
Smith: Crawfordsville was a wonderful place to be at that time. First of all, Crawfordsville called itself the Athens of the West, if you can imagine. This is in Indiana. And it is the home of Wabash College, which at that time was an all-boys' school. It's a lovely, little small town. We lived in the poorer section of town. The AME church was in a poorer section of town. But we had a huge empty lot next to the church and a huge backyard. We were always told that there was a house on the empty lot which was part of the Underground Railroad. And at the other end, around the corner, was a recreation center that we could go to—the whole neighborhood went to. The thing about small towns is it's very difficult for them to be segregated. So, there were very few of our neighbors who were black. Most of the black people lived on the other side of town.

The school—it's interesting, that in Indiana in those days, you had local option segregated schools. Which meant that any city in Indiana, if it wanted to, could segregate the schools. So, in all of the big cities in Indiana, schools through high schools were segregated—in Evansville, in Gary, South Bend, Indianapolis, you have the famous Crispus Attucks School. In Kokomo they had segregated elementary schools—K through 8. My three older brothers began kindergarten in Kokomo, but then we moved to Logansport. So, when I started kindergarten, I went to an integrated school. Then, when we moved to Anderson, all the schools were integrated. But it was interesting—Crawfordsville is an even smaller town than Anderson, but Crawfordsville had segregated schools K through 3. My youngest brother and sister had to go to those schools, K through 3, and then they transferred. Then 4 through 12, the schools were integrated. So, they had to go all the way across town to two-room elementary school. I was the only one in the family who never hit a town where the schools were segregated for my grade. So, I always went to integrated schools.

01-00:14:31
Wilmot: Wow. What did that mean for you?

01-00:14:34
Smith: Well, I don't know, because I never went to a black school or a black college. My family comes from historically black colleges, because Grandfather Whittaker taught at Tuskegee. His oldest son went to Atlanta U, and then taught at Atlanta U. He was the registrar for the consolidated complex—they never truly consolidated. But they had some of their services integrated—Spelman, Morehouse, Atlanta U. So he was head of the office of registration there for many years after teaching. And I think he taught physics. My father's youngest brother went to Tuskegee, then he went to Ames, Iowa, to Iowa State and studied agriculture. That's the same school that George Washington Carver went to. And by the way, George Washington Carver taught biology to both of my parents. He was the biology teacher at Tuskegee when all of them were coming through. So, my uncle went to Ames—I'm sure it must have been because of George Washington Carver. And then he taught agriculture at Florida A&M and later was a dean at the college of agriculture and has a building named for him. There are two names on the agricultural building: one is Benjamin Perry. His son also went to Ames and got his masters and then got a doctorate someplace and later on became president of Florida A&M. Of course, many of my cousins went to Spelman or Morehouse. But I was the only one in my family who never ended up going to a historically black college or going to a segregated school. We did not go to black colleges from Indiana because we couldn't afford it. When I went to college, I went to Ball State, which was a state-supported college. I got a full scholarship the first year.

01-00:17:30
Wilmot: Was that a result of your performance in high school?

01-00:17:33
Smith: Yes, my grades and also passing a test. We had to pass a statewide test similar to the SAT, but it was more of an achievement test; it wasn't an intelligence test. So, I could have gone to any state college in the state of Indiana. My father chose Ball State; I wanted to go to Purdue.

01-00:17:57
Wilmot: What were the dynamics of your choice for Purdue versus Ball State? And why did your father like Ball State?

01-00:18:07
Smith: Well, my father went to Tuskegee and then he went to Drake University. Then, he finally got an AB degree from Indiana State University at Terre Haute after he got married. Then, he got his masters at Ball State in the thirties, after we were all born. He became principal of an elementary school in 1928 in Kokomo, the segregated elementary school. While we were living in Kokomo, the principal of the all-black school was fired. And the superintendent of schools asked Dad if he would step in as principal of the school until they could find somebody, because Dad was the only black person available with a college degree in town, I guess, at that time.

01-00:19:09
Wilmot: And he was well regarded?

01-00:19:10

Smith: Oh yeah. He took over temporarily, and stayed for twenty-one years! [laughs] So when we moved, he commuted back to Kokomo Monday through Friday. He'd leave home Monday morning or Sunday night, and then he would come back Friday night. Once in a while, he would drop in on Wednesday for prayer meeting or something special.

01-00:19:34

Wilmot: So, he had two jobs all of your growing-up years.

01-00:19:38

Smith: Yeah. It was his choice for me to go to Ball State because he had gotten his masters there, and he liked it very much. I wanted to go to Purdue because—actually, Crawfordsville High School was, I thought, just one of the best academic schools in the country. My junior high school grades were good. Whenever we enrolled in a school, [laughs] we often integrated the school, because my brothers were about a year apart, and then I was two years down. My oldest brother was held back a year. So, when we enrolled in high school, they got all four of us—from junior high school to high school. In the small towns, the teachers, the principals never believed that a black student would be smart, you know, a bright student. So, when we moved to Crawfordsville—Crawfordsville had homogeneous grouping all the way through high school. Even though I had very good grades from Anderson, they put me in the second from the top group. I had straight As the first semester. And, actually, the history test, I got a hundred on the final. The history teacher could not believe it. He says nobody had ever gotten a hundred on any of his tests.

The next semester, they put me in the top group. There were three of us who were in the second group whose grades were so good, they moved all three of us into the top group. That means that you stay with that group all the way through high school. So, you take all of your academic classes together because everybody takes algebra, geometry, trig. Everybody takes four years of English. You take Latin, you take physics, you take chemistry. Everyone in the top group took that; and we were all in the same classes, and became very good friends. But two of the people who were with me, in seventh grade who were moved up, also went to Purdue when they graduated. But by then, I had moved to Frankfort, and I knew that some of my friends from Crawfordsville were going to go to Purdue. And besides, Purdue was a more prestigious school, and I wanted to major in math. I thought I wanted to be a doctor, then I thought I wanted to be an engineer.

01-00:23:06

Wilmot: I like all those things you wanted to be. I like that.

01-00:23:11

Smith: Yes. But when I went to Ball State, I majored in math and science. My father wanted me to major in elementary education, which is what my sister majored in. Because he knew that if I got a credential in secondary education, then I would not be able to get a job, probably, in Indiana because the white schools didn't hire black teachers. And there were very few black high schools. There were so many bright black people, you know, that once somebody in your family gets a job teaching at a Crispus Attucks, you know, their kids have a better chance of getting a teaching job than somebody coming in from the outside. And even though my father was an AME minister and people all over

the state knew him, he was right—I couldn't get a job teaching in Indiana after I'd finished my education.

01-00:24:27
Wilmot: Sounds like your sense of the world of opportunity was bigger than his sense of the world of opportunity and that, in the end, his was the right one.

01-00:24:36
Smith: Well, when I went to Ball State, I decided to go four quarters because they had a quarter system. So, I completed my education at Ball State in three years. Again, I didn't graduate with my freshman class. But it didn't make a lot of difference, because when I started Ball State, there were only nine hundred students on campus because it was World War II. When I left, there were about three thousand because the veterans were coming back. So, there was not that sense of *esprit de corps* you would have in a normal college education today. Again, being black, we couldn't stay in the dormitories, we couldn't eat in the restaurants and all that kind of stuff.

01-00:25:26
Wilmot: Were there any Greek organizations on campus?

01-00:25:31
Smith: No. There were white Greeks, but no blacks were invited into their organization. And there were no black Greek organizations on campus. So, as a result, I never joined one. I never saw any sense in joining one after I finished college, and I have never been asked to anyway.

01-00:25:53
Wilmot: I have a question for you, just to go back a little. I didn't capture the names of all your brothers and sisters.

01-00:26:02
Smith: I didn't tell you [laughs].

01-00:26:03
Wilmot: Yeah. And I wanted to ask for them. Then, I wanted to ask you a question about your mother, because raising six children is quite a job in and of itself, but I was wondering if she worked in addition to that.

01-00:26:15
Smith: No, my mother never worked after she got married. She's the one who stayed home with us and did the cooking and the washing and the cleaning while we all went off to school. My oldest brother is named, most of us are named for Dad's brothers and sisters. My oldest brother is named for Dad, his name is Henry. And my second brother is named for my dad's brother, David Alexander. My third brother is named James Olden. And then my sister—my mother rebelled, and she named her Christina.

01-00:27:12
Wilmot: Ooh, what a beautiful name.

01-00:27:14
Smith: And then my youngest brother is named for my father's youngest brother, Benjamin.

01-00:27:20
Wilmot: And who are you named for?

01-00:27:23
Smith: Dad's oldest sister, Mary. I have an Aunt Mary. I have lots of cousins "Mary Perry."

01-00:27:39
Wilmot: What kind of person was your mom?

01-00:27:42
Smith: What kind of person?

01-00:27:44
Wilmot: Yes. How would you describe her?

01-00:27:47
Smith: My mother was a quiet, good-looking, Southern belle kind of person. Her mother was a very interesting person. My mother was very quiet. She loved to read. She loved to play the piano. She mostly played hymns, you know. She got up early, four o'clock in the morning, and went to bed at sundown. She did—as I said, she worked at home. With six kids, she had a lot of washing and ironing. But when my mother grew up, she was one of nine children. And her mother was a very strong woman. And each one of the girls had a job to do, evidently. My mother's was dusting and cleaning. So, she never learned to cook. My father tells the story that when—one of the first meals she cooked after they got married, she bought a New York dressed chicken and made chicken and dumplings, except that a New York dressed chicken meant all the innards were in the chicken [laughs]. So, it was, I guess, a disaster.

01-00:29:28
Wilmot: Yes. Not so good, not so tasty.

01-00:29:31
Smith: But she also learned to bake. She would bake a wonderful pound cake. Even into her late eighties, you'd go by the house, and Mom would have a pound cake. And then she baked rolls. She could do that. But Mom never learned to be a good cook. Dad did a lot of the cooking when he was home. And then as I got older, I helped with the cooking. She was just a nice, quiet person. She was not outgoing. She did not attend a lot of social events, except with Dad. She was involved with church organizations.

So, I was going to say, Crawfordsville was a very good place to go to high school. I got a very good education. And as a result of having a very good background in math and science and English, and in another sense, my brothers took chemistry and physics and math. It never occurred to me as a girl that I wouldn't—that's just what we did. Nobody told me that I couldn't learn math or science. [laughs] So, it was a nice place to go to school.

01-00:31:17
Wilmot: After hearing about your family a little and hearing about the importance—it just seems like education just had such a strong, high place in your family.

01-00:31:29
Smith: It did.

01-00:31:30

Wilmot: From your grandparents to your parents—it's very much of central importance to you.

01-00:31:38

Smith: It's very important to know that my grandparents on my father's side, who were both born in slavery and who weren't freed until they were almost twenty. They were late: grandfather was nineteen and grandmother was seventeen. My grandmother never learned to write or read. I have the document which transfers the property, the old house where my dad was raised, to Dad and his youngest brother. They worked hard and put all the brothers and sisters through college. Dad's brother, Olden, after he went to Tuskegee, went to Howard and finished medical school. He came back to do his internship at the Tuskegee Veteran's Hospital and contracted tuberculosis and died.

Grandmother gave the property to Dad and his younger brother because they stayed on the farm and worked until—Dad stayed until he was twenty-one, and then he started college. I guess his younger brother must have been close to that: nineteen or twenty. So, she signs it with an "X". I guess Grandfather must have learned to read, since he was a minister. He would. And he traveled, an Evangelist minister. It's interesting—we still have lots and lots of cousins right near the farm where my grandparents were farmers. They were farming, at that time, over a thousand acres. Two or three cousins bought their own property, raised their own families there. Then, this problem with black farmers in the South—I don't know whether you've followed any of that, where the black farmers of the South have been marching up and down around the White House and around Congress.

01-00:34:23

Wilmot: Is this about the loans?

01-00:34:24

Smith: It's about subsidies. All these farmers get subsidies for not growing something or for growing peanuts or corn or something. And they won't give it to the black farmers. They wait until they go bankrupt, and then they buy their farms for nothing. I have two cousins who have been marching and have been fighting to get their subsidies. But the subsidies go from the federal government to the county government, which is run by all-white good old boys. Bubbas. And they have refused to give money to the black farmers, which the federal government has given them to pay to the black farmers. So my cousins have fought and fought and fought. They even get notices saying it's coming, and then it never arrives.

01-00:35:40

Wilmot: Oh, that's so awful.

01-00:35:41

Smith: So, one of them went bankrupt. He was picked by the county as one of the leading farmers in that area. Still, he went bankrupt because they would not give him the same money they gave white farmers.

So Dad's family is still in that area. We still own that property. The house is there, it's almost falling down. But it was originally a plantation house. When my grandparents bought it, they raised their family there. They built the AME church on some of the property they had, and they built a school on the property that the children could go to.

The AME church that is in this area, if you look at the cornerstone, the old one was torn down, and they built a new one. They list the trustees. All but one of them was a Perry. [laughs] One of my cousins raised the money to rebuild the church. And the other person who's not a cousin is an in-law to my cousins. It's interesting.

01-00:37:17
Wilmot: Sounds like it's Perry territory.

01-00:37:21
Smith: It's Perry territory. [laughs]

01-00:37:24
Wilmot: Okay. [laughs]. So, I'm thinking now about you going to school at Ball State and being a math and science major. Did you stay that course, or did you eventually switch over to education?

01-00:37:40
Smith: No, Ball State was a teacher's college. So, being a math-science major, you took your academic courses, but you also had to take education courses in your senior year. I did student teaching. They were set up to train math and science teachers. So you took, for example, in science, you don't just major in chemistry or physics, or biology—you had an option which was the physical sciences or the biological sciences. You could opt to have minors in physics, chemistry, or biology or geology, biology, astronomy, or something else. My minors were in physics, biology, and chemistry. Then, my major was math.

When I went to Ball State, as I said, we couldn't afford to go to black colleges because not only did you have to pay for transportation, but room and board and tuition.

01-00:39:05
Wilmot: Was that on your horizon somewhere?

01-00:39:07
Smith: No.

01-00:39:09
Wilmot: Is that something that you were kind of dreaming about or thinking about?

01-00:39:12
Smith: We had friends, you know, who went to West Virginia State or Howard. It always seemed like it would be fun—it would be great to do that. My two oldest brothers went to Tuskegee as soon as they graduated. But they thought they were going to live with Aunt Mary, but they weren't able to live with Aunt Mary. So then they had to get jobs and find housing, which was difficult, and rooming places because they couldn't afford the dorms. Then they would skip chapel. And so they got kicked out. They just went while they were waiting for the draft, and they both got drafted into World War II. Because they finished high school in '42. But none of the rest of us went to a black college. Tuition and room and board were just too expensive.

At Ball State, I worked for my room and board. I lived with a white family. I baby-sat when they went out nights or on weekends. I would get up and get breakfast for the

man of the house. So, we'd have breakfast together. I was never treated like a servant—I sat at the table with them, and I helped them cook in the kitchen. I ironed his shirts; it was one of my chores. And I would help cook. The woman did all the cleaning, and I would help her on weekends. [laughs] But she was very organized. She would dust on Wednesdays—she did the cooking. We did the dishes together. And when they went out, I would stay.

At that time, I was playing violin—I started playing violin in Crawfordsville. I played in the orchestra in Crawfordsville, which was a wonderful experience, because Crawfordsville is a town that considers itself to be very musical. They had a junior high school orchestra and a high school orchestra. We had competitions in the area, in the state, and then in the region. And one summer, our orchestra went to Flint, Michigan, to the regional competition, which was fun. But when I was in college, I kept playing violin. I played in the orchestra my freshman year, and then I found out there are too many three-hour chemistry labs and physics labs. But that was kind of fun because I had a chance to meet some of the music majors, you know. But if I had orchestra practice or the orchestra had a concert or something like that, the people I lived with would hire a baby-sitter to come in. So, it was a wonderful experience, and we stayed friends until they died. And I'm still friends with the family, the children. One of the daughters was born while I was there. At the time I went, they only had one child. He ended up being an engineer and moving to Silicon Valley, raising his family down there.

01-00:43:16
Wilmot: It sounds like they were very sympathetic to you pursuing your education and supportive of it.

01-00:43:20
Smith: Yes.

01-00:43:21
Wilmot: That's good.

01-00:43:23
Smith: So I did not live on campus. I had chores to do, and when I went to class, it was interesting because in my math class, there was one other black person. It was a black male. He ended up teaching math in Arizona. He got a job in Arizona. But it's interesting when I took calculus my first year, I got a ninety-two on a test that the professor gave me a seventy-something on. He would hand out the test papers, then he would go over the answers. And we would check our papers, after he'd already graded them. I was sitting on the front row right under him, and of course he watches to make sure we're not cheating. He had marked two of my problems wrong, that were exactly what he was saying was correct. He couldn't believe it, but I got an "A" in the class. Then, when I was in biology, my professor was a German. He would teach the class that different races had different size heads. And then, he would make us all line up and measure our heads, if you can imagine.

01-00:45:11
Wilmot: I can't imagine, actually. I just cannot.

01-00:45:15
Smith: I hated that man. Anyway, he measured my head, and he couldn't find any difference in size. Then he had to stop and say something.

01-00:45:25
Wilmot: That's crazy. That's so crazy.

01-00:45:31
Smith: He was terrible. And as I said, the dorms were segregated. But anyway, Ball State was interesting, but then I finished in three years by going to summer quarter and then I went to Purdue for my masters.

01-00:45:43
Wilmot: Did you have good friends through Ball State that you kept with you?

01-00:45:47
Smith: No. I think one student from my high school was there. We were on speaking terms, but we were never close.

01-00:45:57
Wilmot: And the other black student? Were you on friendly terms with him?

01-00:46:02
Smith: Oh yes. Yes. We did not stay in touch, but a few times when I went to Indiana, somebody would tell me where he was and what he was doing. His wife was also a student there. They got married after they graduated. She was a music major.

01-00:46:32
Wilmot: It's hard for me to have a picture if there was a community of black students at Ball State or not.

01-00:46:47
Smith: There wasn't because—well. There weren't that many black students there. I can think of three. One of them was this math major, the other one was his girlfriend, who was in music. And another one that I got very close to, but then her mother died of cancer, and she dropped out. And she later married a student who had been a classmate of my brother's in Indiana University, which was interesting. He was a Seventh-day Adventist. Oh, she was a Seventh-day Adventist, I guess. So, my brother's friend had to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

01-00:47:47
Wilmot: Mary, can I ask you something? Because your father was a minister and his father was a minister, what role did church play in your life on the day-to-day?

01-00:47:57
Smith: Well, the church, I think, was extremely important in my life, because there was always that church community. And since we lived in a small town, everybody in town knew we were the preacher's kids. We could never stray too far. I mean, we would do a lot of—we would try to do a lot of things other kids were doing, but we couldn't really because word always came back to Dad, even though he wasn't there. You know. And as a preacher's kid, it was more difficult being a preacher's kid with most of the black kids than it was with the white kids.

Because we moved so much, one of the things I missed is having an elementary school friend that I stayed friends with for fifty years, you know, sixty years. Or even a high school friend who was really that close. I had one high school friend from Crawfordsville I still correspond with. But we're never close; every Christmas we write a letter. We were the preacher's kids and so we never got to go to the parties. We were never really—we could not do a lot of the things the other kids did. So, we always felt—you know, we could always sit around and grouse with each other about—I always had five siblings, especially my three older brothers and I. There was a little distance, two and a half years, between my sister and me. So, I was closer with my older brothers. But when you came home, you always had someone to complain to, you know. Being a preacher's kid and all the things we had to do.

But in church, you had a chance to be a leader. We would sing in the choir, and my sister and I took piano lessons. And when we lived in a little town like Crawfordsville or Frankfort, if the organist didn't show up, we could play the church hymns for church. And when I was taking violin, you know, when there was the Christmas play, I'd get to perform. We would always be in the Christmas play and help put it on, or the Easter play. It was important. You were in church all the time, it seemed, which we weren't too happy about as kids. Because on Sunday, we'd go to Sunday school, then regular church, then go home and have dinner, and then come back for the Young Christian Association, and then go to evening service. So we were in church, we were always in church New Year's Eve and Christmas Eve, while everybody else was out celebrating.

But people loved my father. And so they always took good care of us, so that was nice. My father talked a lot about his family and his heroes and his history, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver. Frederick Douglass was one of his favorite people. So we always got in his sermons a lot of history. As I got older, I loved to read. I would take a book to church and sit there and read. [laughs] Especially for the evening services, when there may have been ten people in the church.

01-00:52:27

Wilmot: It sounds also like race consciousness was really big part of your family life. And I say race consciousness, but I guess I mean a sense of history and commitment and going forward, actually.

01-00:52:45

Smith: Race consciousness was always a part of our education in our family life, because my father was very strongly committed to the history of the race. As a matter of fact, when he was principal of the school, he also taught history. The principal always taught a class. So he taught history. But he taught a lot of black history, and he taught it from his own experience as well as reading. So, we got all of this in church. It never occurred to us that black people couldn't be doctors or lawyers or engineers or anything else they wanted to be. There was nothing that ever would make us feel that we were limited in what we could achieve if we ever had the opportunity to outside, you know. We were never made to feel like inferior because we were black. My father was always very proud, a very proud man. And even though we may have been called "nigger" many times and told to leave restaurants or places like that, not being able to stay in hotels, it just was not anything that made us feel other than the fact that we are black. And that's it, if you don't like it that's your problem.

01-00:54:27
Wilmot: Do you belong to a church now?

01-00:54:33
Smith: No.

01-00:54:34
Wilmot: Okay.

01-00:54:36
Smith: No, I never really, even as a child, felt any great, deep religious stirrings. I just don't feel that anybody really has a right answer. I think that you really have to live an ethical life, but those principles that you can derive from almost any religion. But it was a wonderful education, growing up in the church.

01-00:55:22
Wilmot: When you left Ball State, did you go immediately to pursue your masters at Purdue or did you teach for a while?

01-00:55:30
Smith: No, I went immediately to Purdue because I couldn't get a job.

01-00:55:33
Wilmot: But was that process of looking for a job, what was that like?

01-00:55:38
Smith: Yes, yeah. You just apply. Actually, my father went with me for an interview to Crispus Attucks, thinking he had some pull there. But you simply apply at all the schools where there's any opening. Nobody bit, so I went to Purdue for my masters. Then after Purdue, the same thing happened, except that my brother, the one who's just older than I, had just—he graduated from Indiana University. He graduated in 1947 from Indiana University with his masters in science education.

That was the year that Texas Southern opened. Under "separate but equal," any black student in Texas could go to any school in the country to study a profession that was not taught by a black college in Texas. Texas would pay 100 percent of the educational cost for that student. One student decided that he did not want to leave Texas—he was a Texan—and that he wanted to go to law school. But he wanted to go to law school in Texas. He applied to the University of Texas for law school. And, of course, they wouldn't admit him. But under separate but equal, they would pay his education anyplace he wanted to go. He refused to leave, so they built a whole university, overnight, to have a law school for him in Houston.

That was in the days when there was a lot of rich oil money floating around in Texas. So, they took a two-year community college, and over the summer, they turned it into Texas State University for Negroes. They hired a complete faculty and built a building for a law school. And that's how Texas Southern got started. The first year, they hired PhDs from Morehouse, from Southern, and from Howard. They were paying the highest salaries of any of the historically black colleges. So, my brother couldn't find a job after graduating from Indiana University with his masters. So he applied to Texas Southern, Texas State University for Negroes, and got a job. In 1948 when I finished

Purdue, I couldn't find a job. So he said, "They're hiring here. Why don't you apply here?" And I did. I got a job teaching math in a college, which was absolutely fantastic, because you don't teach five classes a day, five days a week. I taught there for three years. It was a wonderful experience because the people who were my colleagues had come from all over the country. They were almost all PhDs and masters. It was a wonderful experience seeing the university, you know, though those first few years.

01-01:00:03
Wilmot: Do you remember who some of your colleagues were?

01-01:00:05
Smith: Well, the president was R. O'Hara Lanier, who was a good friend of Madam Mary Bethune. So that's how he got the job. Every time he got in trouble, he'd invite Mrs. Bethune to the campus to speak. One of the young men who came there to teach became a famous artist. I can't remember his name. [John Biggers] But most of them would not be people that anybody would know. There was Dr. and Mrs. Joseph Pierce. He was head of the math and science division. He was a PhD. He came from Atlanta—Morehouse, and she was a PhD. And she was in charge of the physical education department.

01-01:01:07
Wilmot: It sounds like this was like this interesting flowering time in your life. You had an intellectual community.

01-01:01:17
Smith: It was wonderful.

01-01:01:18
Wilmot: Yeah.

01-01:01:20
Smith: I don't know how much of the intellectual life I took part in, [laughs] but I made a lot of wonderful friends there. My brother actually stayed there for forty years. He still lives in Houston. But that's where I met Norvel. He had the same experience in Philadelphia. So he ended up coming to Texas in 1950, and we met and got married within a few months in March in '51.

01-01:01:54
Wilmot: It seems also like maybe a lot of the students were close to your age.

01-01:02:00
Smith: Some of them were older, because a lot of them were veterans, you see, coming back and going to school under the GI Bill. Mostly, I was teaching high school subjects, which were algebra and geometry and trig, because a lot of them had never had that when they were in school. Or what they'd had, they had forgotten it. So, it was really fast—you teach algebra and geometry all in one year.

01-01:02:35
Wilmot: What were your favorite parts of math? What part did you love the most?

01-01:02:39
Smith: Geometry.

01-01:02:39
Wilmot: Geometry.

01-01:02:40
Smith: I had a wonderful geometry teacher in Crawfordsville. And I ended up teaching geometry at Oakland Tech for seventeen years. I loved it.

01-01:02:51
Wilmot: What was your experience at Purdue like?

01-01:02:53
Smith: Purdue, I was commuting. I'd run and catch the Greyhound bus every morning at six o'clock in the morning. Purdue was only about twenty miles away from where we lived at the time in Frankfort. Now, I had graduated from Ball State and had to move back home and live at home to go to Purdue, because again, we couldn't afford to live in the dorms. So, I caught the Greyhound bus every day and came home on the Greyhound bus every day. And it was interesting because at Purdue, they had students from all over the world—students from India and Asia. And some of the—one of the friends I made was a Chinese couple who were majoring in math. I used to study with them; they would help me with some of the difficult math, because even though my major was in counseling and guidance at Purdue, my minors were biochemistry and statistics.

Purdue had just started the counseling and guidance department because before that, they never had any educational courses there. They had hired Dr. Wilson from Kansas City. There were only three of us in the class, in the counseling and guidance class. That was very different because sometimes we'd meet in her home and—that was interesting, being in graduate school. Then, I took biochemistry, which was fun. I took statistics, which was the pits! [laughs] Because, you know, math is not that bad, but when you have to apply it to a whole bunch of data, you have to also understand the world in which the data came from. I had a rough time with statistics, so I would always study with the Chinese couple. But it was a wonderful experience because I was a graduate student, but I was the same age as the seniors. And my two best friends who were in Crawfordsville were there, so we'd run into each other on campus sometimes.

01-01:05:34
Wilmot: Who were these two people?

01-01:05:35
Smith: Who were they?

01-01:05:38
Wilmot: Yeah.

01-01:05:38
Smith: One was Catherine Bruner, who was majoring in home ec., and she married an engineer.

01-01:05:48
Wilmot: There were a a lot of engineers at Purdue?

01-01:05:51
Smith: Yeah. He ended up being the senior vice president of Campbell Soup, and then became a distinguished alumnus at Purdue and was frequently, after he retired, called back to

teach classes in engineering at Purdue. The other one was David Wright, who always sat behind me, or close to me. Marie Peacock sat behind me, come to think of it. Oh, she sat in front of me, David sat in back of me. David went to Purdue, and he ended up being an engineer. I think for a while that he worked here in California, only I didn't know it until after he had moved away. So, they were the two people there. When I was taking these courses in counseling and guidance, I had to learn how to do the Simon-Binet [sic] intelligence test and the Wechsler intelligence test and all that kind of stuff. And I would use them as subjects. [laughs]

01-01:07:15

Wilmot: You would test your friends' intelligence? [laughter]

01-01:07:18

Smith: Yeah. They were always very nice and cooperative.

01-01:07:21

Wilmot: How did you make that shift, then? From saying math and science was your primary—your major to saying counseling and guidance would be? How did that happen for you?

01-01:07:31

Smith: Well, because I decided to be a teacher. I had to take courses in education and get a degree in education. But I still continued to take chemistry and math classes in graduate school. So, you can't—[laughs] well, I guess you could spend all your graduate time in education classes. And I did come to Cal. My first year at Cal, I took education classes. I took classes in educational psych because of the guy Froebel who was the big name in counseling and guidance. He had written a book we'd all studied, had left because of the loyalty oath when I got here. I thought he would be my professor, but he wasn't.

01-01:08:40

I took classes for about a year and a half. The second year, I started working part-time. And then I got a job teaching in San Francisco, and I would come back and take night classes. But it was too much, so I gave up on getting a doctorate. I was in the doctoral program.

01-01:09:05

Wilmot: I have a question for you, and this is one more question about Purdue. You mentioned that there was a lot of people from other countries who were here—

01-01:09:19

Smith: Well, you know. If you grew up in Indiana, or if you grew up in Indiana at the time I grew up in Indiana, the only people we saw were black people and white people. I remember my father told me that one day, in Kokomo, because he lived there during the week, he saw a Japanese man walk down the street. And he ran after him and stopped and talked to him [laughs] because he had never seen, or really—there weren't even any Jews that I knew of. You know, if somebody was a Jew, he was just a white person to us. But I never actually—this is so stupid but—not until I went to college did I realize that Jews were still alive. I thought they were all in the Bible! I mean, that's how white Christian Indiana was at that time.

One summer when I was at Ball State, before my senior year, I was a delegate to the YWCA/YMCA regional convention that was on Lake Geneva at the YMCA camp on the lake. And I found out that they hired college students to run the camp. So, the next year I applied, after graduation, to work that summer. I got a job working in the kitchen. Eventually, I headed the dishwashing machine. [laughs] I was in charge of the dishwashing machine, which was a huge monster. You put the dishes in one end, then they came out the other. But it was a fabulous summer because there were students from all over the Midwest colleges who were working there. And actually, I made a friend with a student from Burma. We're still friends. She married a man who lives in Ames, Iowa. But that was about the only time I had a lot of contact, any kind of contact, with people from other countries. So, when I went to Purdue, there weren't that many, but there were some students who were Chinese and Indian. I actually had a date with an Indian student, and I actually became friends with this Chinese couple.

01-01:12:09

Wilmot: I wonder what it was like to encounter people who had a different—a race paradigm other than the American race paradigm, and to communicate that paradigm that you had grown up with, and internalized, of course, to people who didn't have that same paradigm.

01-01:12:26

Smith: We didn't talk about it. That's just the way things were. But when we talked to each other, on a one-to-one basis, it was usually, we came together around common interests, mathematics. I don't think I asked them too much about—I didn't know that much about China. If they'd told me where they were from in China, I wouldn't have had a clue. And also, I wouldn't have remembered their names. Now, I wish I had written them down. Now, I knew where India was! [laughs] But—it's just so insulated in the Midwest. And to a certain extent, it still is.

01-01:13:20

Wilmot: I've heard from your husband a little bit about how you chose to come to the Bay Area—how you two met and married and made that choice. And I'm wondering if I can hear the same story from you? From your perspective, I mean?

01-01:13:38

Smith: Well, we met and kind of started dating immediately—the same day! [laughs] Then, we got engaged in December; we met in August, got engaged in December, got married in March. During the time after we were engaged, we talked about where we wanted to live and what we wanted to do. We both wanted to go to graduate school to get our doctorates. And the question was how we could work that into our lives. And so we applied to the University of Texas and the University of Houston. We even went to Austin and applied for part-time jobs at the black colleges in Houston, thinking that if we taught in those schools—because one of the professors in music from Texas Southern had gone to that college to teach music, that we could combine work with getting a PhD.

Well, the Texas Board of Regents, which ran the university—this was a very touchy time, since they had set up Texas Southern to keep blacks out of the university. But then the Supreme Court had ruled against them. So, actually, at that time, the universities were all open to—they were ordered by the courts to open to blacks. So, when Norvel

and I applied to both universities, the word got back to the president of the university, R. O'Hara Lanier, who took orders from the regents. He had the dean of women call me in and talk to me about, "What was I trying to do, cause trouble?" And he had somebody else, dean of men, talk to Norvel. And I said, "We were just applying for schools," because, you know, the Supreme Court had already ruled. "Also," I said, "If Dr. Lanier wants to talk to me about this, why doesn't he talk to me himself?" So, I went in and spoke with him.

But anyway, the upshot was we had friends who had come to California every summer. We would talk about what we were going to do with our friends. And this couple was a little bit older. They told us, "If you go to California, go to San Francisco, Bay Area. Don't go to LA because LA is just like Houston." And they said, "You will love the Bay Area." So, we talked about the fact that we weren't going to stay in Texas after all, and we weren't going back to Philadelphia or Indiana. Neither one of us wanted to go there, either place. "Why don't we try California?" And we both applied for graduate school in California. So, we applied to Stanford and Cal, and we were admitted to both schools. But our savings, which we had saved to go to graduate school, would not allow us to go to Stanford, so we went to Cal. So, that's how we came to California, and not knowing where we would go from there. But of course once we got here, we stayed and can't believe how smart we were to pick, first of all, northern California. [laughs] And it's been a happy happenstance for us.

01-01:18:06
Wilmot: Now, you were at Cal for a year?

01-01:18:10
Smith: I was full-time for a year and then part-time for two years. Then I got to the point where I had finished all the course work for a doctorate in educational psychology, and would have to pick a topic for research. At that time, I had started teaching. We had finally gotten jobs, and we'd been here for two years. We got jobs teaching in San Francisco, and I was in a junior high school. Since I was a new teacher, I was in to replace a teacher who was pregnant, who taught math. After the first week, they took all the algebra classes from me, left me with one or two arithmetic classes: seventh, eighth, or ninth grade, and they gave me social studies classes, so— [laughs] And one of them was the history of San Francisco.

01-01:19:32
Wilmot: Why was that? Why did this happen?

01-01:19:34
Smith: That's what they do to new teachers. It's like seniority. The more senior you are, the better classes you get. So, I could not step in—this teacher had been there long enough. She had the top algebra classes and the top arithmetic classes. She had the top homeroom. I kept the top homeroom that year. So, when I got there, after the first week, they took all the good classes and gave them to a teacher who had been there longer than I. But they didn't give me math classes in place. And so I had to learn the history of San Francisco, which was a lot of fun, but I hated teaching it. I loved reading about it, fascinating history. I taught arithmetic and social studies.

And then finally, after I had been there for about two or three years, knew my way around, one of the science teachers who was a good friend of mine—we were all young teachers at that time. It was during the baby boom period. I would have forty-five students in a class and five classes a day. He got a job teaching at Acalanes High—they had just built Acalanes High, opened Acalanes High. He got a job teaching chemistry. He was a science teacher. So, I told the principal to give me science classes. I said, "I also teach science, I'm not just a science teacher—don't give me any more social studies." So, then I started teaching five classes of seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade science. And that was fun.

01-01:21:50
Wilmot: Sounds like so much hard work to me.

01-01:21:53
Smith: It was so much hard work. It was a lot of work. And that's when I decided I couldn't continue taking night classes, driving over from San Francisco for a four o'clock class and a seven o'clock class. I mean, driving into Berkeley.

01-01:22:11
Wilmot: You were living in San Francisco at the time?

01-01:22:14
Smith: We had moved to San Francisco at the time. We just lived about three or four blocks from the school where I was teaching.

01-01:22:23
Wilmot: Was that a hard decision for you to decide to not pursue your doctoral education for you?

01-01:22:29
Smith: No, because I never thought it would be permanent. I just thought at some point, I could go back if I really wanted to. But then, I never wanted to, because I enjoyed teaching. But those first few years were hell on wheels! [laughs] Because first of all, I started out teaching in college, and that was a breeze, because I didn't teach five classes a day. Maybe, I would have two classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and two on Tuesdays and Thursdays, something like that. Here I was teaching five classes a day, with yelling, screaming seventh and eighth graders. By the time they got to ninth grade, they were fairly human, and you could deal with them. But some of the eighth graders were just terrible to teach, in terms of disciplining and getting their attention.

01-01:23:29
Wilmot: It's a hard age.

01-01:23:34
Smith: I had never taught that age. I didn't get any help on how to organize them or keep their attention. The subject matter is easy. The hard part about teaching is engaging your students. You have to learn—it takes you about ten or fifteen years to figure that out, [laughs] unless you're a drama teacher or have some special talent. It took a while, it took a couple years before I finally felt that I was fully in control of what I was doing. Then, I was teaching science, and I worked very hard on my lessons. Science was fun because it was general science, and children love science. I don't care how old they are.

Because there are bugs and rats and fish. And the classroom snakes—I let them handle all that. I never had to—I assigned the students to handle all that kind of stuff. The snakes would get out periodically and be found under another teacher's chair. But I never had to touch them. [laughs]

But I would do experiments for the kids. They would write term papers every semester. I graded every one carefully, gave them back to them and talked to them about—so, it was hours and hours and hours of preparation and work to keep their attention. There was just a wealth of material for teachers of science at that time to do, to teach. I think one of the most exciting—two really exciting things happened to me when I was teaching seventh- and eighth-grade general science. One was, you'd teach a little bit of biology, a little bit of chemistry, a little bit of physics, a little bit of geology. In the geology section, it was talking about earthquakes, and then the 1958 earthquake happened right in the middle of the class [laughs], which was pretty scary.

01-01:26:10
Wilmot: Scary and fortuitous at the same time.

01-01:26:14
Smith: And we were close to the epicenter because it was in South San Francisco, and we were the farthest south junior high school at the time. Then we also taught a little astronomy. And there were wonderful Bell Telephone films about science that they developed about rockets, about space travel, about almost any subject in science. You could show the students a movie and talk to them. Then one day, about—late in the afternoon, the last period of the day, one of my students came running into the room from another room. He had been in a classroom, listening to the radio. And he came running into my room saying, "Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Smith! The Russians have sent a satellite up!" Because we had talked about all this, they had seen the movies, you know. We showed the rocket taking off and launching the satellites. He was in school, listening to the radio and heard it on the radio. He wanted to make sure that I heard about it back there. That's the kind of feedback you get as a teacher, that you can't really pay for. Nobody can pay you for that.

01-01:27:48
Wilmot: Who were the kids you were teaching there? These seventh and eighth graders?

01-01:27:55
Smith: Seventh, eighth, and ninth.

01-01:27:57
Wilmot: Who were they in terms of mostly their backgrounds?

01-01:28:02
Smith: Most of them were just white, large Italian neighborhood. I was teaching at James Denman Junior High School at that time. The Excelsior district was largely Italian. I think I had one or two Asians. I had very few black students. I was the only black teacher there. When I went there {inaudible}. But they were mostly white—just regular white and Italian.

01-01:28:43
Wilmot: Was the administration very supportive of your teaching science?

01-01:28:47

Smith: No. We had a Mormon woman, who was a dean of women. She would talk about the "little darkies" when she talked in front of the teachers. In the teachers' lunchroom, the teachers would talk about the "blackies," you know. They didn't know I was black, or they didn't realize at the moment. It's something I've always had to deal with, being in a situation—either with black people or white people. [laughs] I mean, being with black people or white people, and they think I'm white. You know, I've had students come up to me years later and say, "Mrs. Smith, I never knew you were black." Black students would tell me. So, you don't know. You can't walk into a conversation and say, "Hello, my name Mary Smith. I'm black." [laughs] You know how that is? So, you get a lot of conversation that if they knew you were black, you wouldn't. They would wait until later.

The principal was Mr. Milquetoast. Whenever there was problem, he would go lock his door and read the paper or something. He never dealt with problems. Fortunately, we had a wonderful faculty. A core group in the science department, we had a wonderful group of people. And I met one of my best friends there, who was a librarian. We would have lunch together. In those days, the men sat on one side of the lunchroom, the women sat on the other. And my friend and I would say, "Let's go sit on the men's side." And the men would come in and they would sit down, but they wouldn't speak to us. That kind of thing. It was—the men were "Keep the women barefoot and pregnant" type men, you know. That was their attitude toward women, mostly. Most of them.

01-01:31:36

Wilmot: Interesting.

01-01:31:37

Smith: Yeah.

01-01:31:38

Wilmot: What part of San Francisco did you live in?

01-01:31:41

Smith: Near City College. Just three or four blocks from James Lick High School, on Terrace Street, near Ocean Avenue. They put the freeway and the BART station through since we left. When we lived there, there was no freeway and there was no BART. When we found out they were going to buy the houses across the street from us to put Highway 280 in, we moved over here. We started looking over here. And by then, Norvel had been commuting to Hayward. As soon as we bought a house in San Francisco and moved over there, he got a job working with the Alameda County schools.

01-01:32:33

Wilmot: Well, let's see. I want to just stop for a minute and see how you're doing.

[interview interruption]

01-01:33:00

When you first came to the Bay Area, and you went to school at Berkeley to pursue your graduate degree in educational psychology, what was that experience like for you?

01-01:33:19

Smith: It was interesting because I was married, for one thing, which was the first time I was married and going to school. We lived in Albany Village. I guess the most fun was being in Albany Village on Gill Court and being in a housing unit that had about sixteen couples. All of the husbands were veterans because it was housing for married veterans. A lot of them were in graduate school, and some were in undergraduate school. We became great friends. The wives would have sewing get-togethers on Wednesday night or something. But I was a student—none of the other wives were in school; they were either working or housewives. Most of them were working, helping their husbands through school. I was not interested in being in a sewing group. But I would go once in a while to be friendly. On Friday nights or on holidays, we'd buy a jug of red wine and somebody would make some pasta and we'd sit around and tell jokes all night. It was a lot of fun. But on the other hand, we were always broke. We always had to look for part-time jobs. And at Cal, if you're student and you want a part-time job, you go to what was called BUROC. The jobs they always gave black students were house cleaning or cooking or something or baby-sitting, or something like that. So, those were the jobs they gave us. Then finally, one of the students in one of my education classes, I became very friendly with her. She was a reader for one of the education classes. And she got me a job helping her as a reader. So I was reader for one of the education classes for a while. And so I got to be really friendly with a couple of professors. That was a lot of fun, being on the inside, you know. The professors were very friendly.

01-01:36:19

Wilmot: Which professors did you work with?

01-01:36:22

Smith: I don't remember. I think somebody named [Lohmann?] and another professor, but they're both dead now. Also, I took a class with the dean of education, William A. Brownell. He had written his doctoral thesis, I think, at University of Chicago, on math education. He was very famous in the field of education. I took a couple of classes with him, and he was just a gentle soul. He was a wonderful guy. I think he may have been at Duke University a while, I'm not sure. But he had lost a daughter at some point in his life, and she was either in college or high school. It affected him very deeply, and once in a while, he'd talk about it.

When I was in his class, we'd sit around a long table and it was wonderful to have a class instead of in a big lecture hall. We'd sit around the table and talk. He would talk a lot about his research. Always, he impressed us with, "I don't care what the curriculum is or what the curriculum says. You start with the students where they are, and then you take them someplace. You just don't jump in and start teaching. You find out where your students are, and then you take them someplace." Help them to progress. He was a wonderful professor. Otherwise, I just remember spending a lot of time in the library, a lot of time working. And then I got a job doing statistical analysis for somebody else's thesis.

01-01:38:30

Wilmot: How did you end up doing statistical analysis after you disliked it so much?

01-01:38:35

Smith: It wasn't a happy job. I hope the guy got his—I know he got his masters. He was in social welfare. It was mostly mathematical work there. It was just crunching the numbers for him.

01-01:38:51

Wilmot: And this woman who you became a reader with—do you remember who she was?

01-01:38:59

Smith: Her name was Fleming.

01-01:39:04

Wilmot: And she was your friend. Were there other colleagues that became friends? Other people in your department who you became friendly with?

01-01:39:11

Smith: Not so much in the department, but as I said, in our living space. Because in education, at that time, a lot of the classes were geared towards people getting their degrees, who were actually working in the field. And so, a lot of the classes were four-to-six and seven-to-ten. People who came in were superintendents or principals or people who were teaching. I had never taught in public school. I used to get so bored with their talking. [laughs] Then, there was this one student who was always quoting from some research in class, backing up everything she said with these research papers she had talked about. By four o'clock, you know, you were pretty tired and certainly by seven. So that after a while, when you got into classes that were not theory classes that were taught during the regular nine-to-five day, I think I lost a lot of interest. And a lot of the professors, some of the professors who taught some of those classes themselves, had never taught. And I didn't think they knew what they were talking about, especially after I started teaching and then driving over. Then, there's one guy I had to take the history of education with and another one, who was so boring. All he did was read from his thesis: year after year after year, he would just talk about his thesis. He never did anything. Then, they had these horrible take-out exams, where all they do is weigh them. Whoever turns in the most. I don't think anyone ever read them. So, somebody who'd been in the class said, "Just do as much research as you can. Cite the research. Have lots of footnotes. Go through the library and get everything you can out of it, then take notes from the book and cite it in your footnotes." I did that; I turned it in. They said, "To get an 'A', you need to turn in a hundred pages." I turned in a hundred pages, I got an "A." It's nice to have friends in class who know the ropes. [laughs] Coming from math and science background, that was not interesting.

01-01:42:21

Wilmot: Yeah, it wasn't as delightful as, say, geometry, and I have a question about geometry. Why did you love geometry? What about geometry makes it special to you?

01-01:42:31

Smith: I don't know, it's just that I had a wonderful teacher. I guess I liked the logic. If this, then that. You know, I guess. Following something all the way through. I love calculus, too, for the same reason. I loved to go through twenty-five steps and at the end, it's right! It works out! It's just exciting. But geometry hits—I like the logic of it. In algebra, it seemed just to be sort of mechanical. But eventually, in the new math, they integrated algebra and geometry. So, algebra became more interesting, and they introduced more algebra into geometry in the new math.

You're too young to remember, but the new math you know simply as "math." The new math was introduced in the late fifties, early sixties. When it was put in schools, the parents went bananas. Because, first of all, the books didn't have the new math. The teachers were teaching from Xerox copies. The new math had been developed by some group at, I think, Stanford or one of the universities back East. The parents didn't know it. And when the students went home, the parents couldn't help them with their math. So, they had to then have classes for parents in elementary school to teach the parents the new math, so they could help their students. And it was just moving down a lot of the math theory from calculus down into arithmetic. So, it was consistent all the way up. Actually, they should integrate math, algebra, geometry, trig, and calculus as they do in European countries. All the way through, instead of having little, precise categories.

01-01:44:57
Wilmot: And treating each of those categories as levels.

01-01:45:01
Smith: Right. As entirely separate subjects, you know. "I will learn algebra in the ninth grade, then I will forget algebra. I will go to the tenth grade, then I will learn geometry. Then, I get to the eleventh grade, and I have to remember my algebra again, because now I take algebra two." It's so stupid.

01-01:45:20
Wilmot: That's true, it is hard.

01-01:45:22
Smith: I remember when I was in eighth grade—seventh and eighth grades were originally designed to be exploratory years. They actually did that in Indiana. So, in seventh and eighth grade, you had a little bit of Latin, a little bit of a foreign language. In your studies, you had a little bit of algebra, a little bit of geometry. It was all there. So, when you got to it, it wasn't a complete surprise.

I enjoyed teaching geometry. One thing I found out about teaching geometry was that at Oakland Tech, we had a lot of students from other countries. Because any student who immigrated to this country and lived in Oakland and was of high school age, went to Oakland Tech. We had an international—what we called an international program. And the students would learn their English in that class. But then a lot of them had had math, let's say, or science in their countries. So, they already knew the theory, they just didn't know the English translation for what they were doing. But in math, that's fairly easy, not too difficult, because the symbols are the same. So, I would be teaching students geometry from Yugoslavia, from Japan, from all over the world. It was interesting to see them work and to watch them. They could figure it out and do the math. Some of them would have dictionaries that they would use in class. But I liked geometry very much. I ended up, actually, teaching four classes of geometry, almost seventeen years. Very interesting.

01-01:47:28
Wilmot: Kind of communicating your enjoyment of the subject?

01-01:47:32

Smith: Well, it just happened. When you get to the Oakland Tech part, I'll tell you how it happened.

01-01:47:39

Wilmot: Okay. One of the things, and it might be a little early in our interview for this question, but when you were talking about Professor Brownell, it made me wonder: What experiences do you feel helped you teach better? What were your biggest learning experiences that you brought to the classroom? And this may be a question for later. You can tell me that, and I can maybe ask it in different ways.

01-01:48:13

Smith: Well, off the top of my head I would say, first of all, you have to want to be a teacher, and you have to like the students—the age you're teaching. That's why I would never teach elementary school. I don't think that I could relate. I must teach students who can give me feedback, that I can talk to on an equal level. It's difficult to talk down. So I enjoyed teaching the older students. I guess maybe because I started teaching in college. But even when I started out, learning to be a teacher, I never studied elementary education. I was always interested in the subject matter, and if you're interested in the subject matter, then that's communicated to students at that level. And that would be the older students, which would be junior high or high school, but preferably high school. So that was one of the things about teaching, but I learned more from my students about teaching when I got to the level where I would listen to them when they would tell me things about what I was doing.

Also, I had lots and lots of student teachers from the Cal, over the years. The interchange, the feedback from student teachers and from their supervisors as they would talk to the student teachers, you learned a lot. You learned to try different things, and you find things that work. Then, you can fine-tune them, you know. But you're always learning as a teacher because every year, the students change. Some years, you get a group of students, and there's no way in the world you can find to communicate with them, and the only thing you can do is hope graduation comes as soon as possible. [laughs] And the next year, they're just fantastic. I used to always say there must have been something in the water that year.

01-01:50:47

Wilmot: How long did you teach in the SFUSD, at the San Francisco School District?

01-01:50:53

Smith: Eight years.

01-01:50:54

Wilmot: So it was 19—

01-01:50:56

Smith: '53 to '61.

01-01:50:58

Wilmot: '61. And by that time, you'd moved over here and built this house.

01-01:51:01

Smith: Mm-hm. And so I wanted to teach over here, so I didn't have to commute. But I did not want to teach junior high school. And we were very good friends with the assistant superintendent, associate superintendent, Gordon MacAndrew. When Norvel started working for the Alameda County schools, but he was very active in the East Bay Democratic Club and the Men of Tomorrow. Through them we had a chance to meet a lot of the movers and shakers in this area, one of them was the first black person on the Oakland school board, Barney Hilburn. We were very good friends with him. And the associate superintendent was a good friend of his. So, we got to meet these people because we lived here.

Then, I told them that I wanted to teach in a senior high school, I did not want to teach in a junior high school. So I got the job teaching at Oakland Tech. And it just so happened that the year I applied was the year they opened Skyline High. Skyline High took, this district that is—all of Montclair was in the Oakland Tech district. All of those kids went to Oakland Tech. Then as soon as they opened Skyline High, everybody above Highway 13 went to Skyline. So a lot of the teachers at Oakland Tech left because the principal from Oakland Tech went to Skyline to open the school, and he took with him quite a few of the teachers from Tech. So that happened to be the year I applied, so there were a lot of openings at Oakland Tech. It was just happenstance. And it was fun because they hired a lot of young teachers, a lot of new teachers.

01-01:53:20

Wilmot: That must have really transformed the character of Oakland Tech High School.

01-01:53:25

Smith: It did. But, I never knew it before.

01-01:53:30

Wilmot: So you started there in 1961?

01-01:53:32

Smith: Yes. In fall of '61, I started teaching at Tech. I taught geometry and arithmetic. All of the teachers in the math department have to teach one remedial—quote "remedial"—math class. It just so happened that one of the other teachers was the wife of a graduate student at Berkeley. Her husband was working on his PhD in physics. So, while he was getting his PhD in physics, she was teaching math at Tech. She was a math teacher. We were about the same ages, and we became very good friends. Tech was going through a remodeling process at that time, and they took all of the counseling suite. They had rebuilt the counseling suite across the hall, and the principal's office, across the hall from where it used to be. So, they had one whole side of the building facing Broadway that was empty. We had a very progressive principal at the time, a young man. And he decided—the big thing at that time was team-teaching. So, he built three classrooms with folding walls that made it possible to open up three classrooms, or four—I've forgotten how many—to try out, quote, "Some of the new things in teaching." At least, the physical facilities were there.

01-01:55:47

Wilmot: What was his name?

01-01:55:49

Smith: The principal was John Borum, B-O-R-U-M. Jean Williams, who was teaching geometry and trig, suggested that I work with her and that we team-teach geometry and take advantage of those facilities. So she went to the principal and she said, "Mary and I would like to team-teach geometry, and we need to use those rooms. We could have adjoining classes, and then we could open the doors and put the classes together for team-teaching. We will get student teachers from Cal, so we can break them down into smaller groups." And that was just after Sputnik, so there was lots of money in the National Science—Association?

01-01:57:02

Wilmot: Foundation?

01-01:57:03

Smith: National Science Foundation for teaching math and science. The school had money—the district could get all kinds of money for equipment and books. We ordered overhead projectors, and we got mechanical things you could manipulate into the geometrical shapes of triangles and other things that show congruent triangles with SAS or SSS or something like that. And we got lots of "hands-on" kinds of equipment. Then we took the new math again, the new books that were out in geometry, and they weren't available in print. [laughs] So, we had to do a lot of Xeroxing. And then, not only did all of the students in Oakland who were from other countries, and non-English speaking students, come to Tech, but also all of the blind students of high school age from the School for the Blind—it used to be on Derby Street. The university took it over for that special Clark Kerr Campus. It used to be the School for the Blind and the Deaf. So those students came to Tech. So what Jean and I did was to go to the School for the Blind all summer and read from the textbook into a tape so students could listen to their lessons. We'd punch holes in paper for the geometric design, so they could feel the triangles and other geometric figures.

We did a lot of planning for team-teaching. We would take turns lecturing different subjects. While one person lectured, the other one would be moving about the room. We had an overhead projector, we had a microphone, so the students in the back could hear. We wore white coats—lab coats [laughs]. And students tell us, some of my former students tell me, that they would come in to tenth grade from junior high school, and they were scared to death of us with our white coats and our microphones and our overhead projectors. But they said, "We were ready for Cal when we got out of there."

We also, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, we would lecture and introduce new topics. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, we would break the groups into four smaller groups and take advantage of whatever other empty classrooms we could find. Each one of us would have a student teacher from Cal, and we would have work sections with the students in geometry. Jean and I would plan the lessons weeks in advance. Every student would get, in those days, a mimeograph sheet, giving their homework assignments for a whole week. So, if they happened to be sick or have to be absent for any reason, they could still do their homework. There were some teachers, I heard of, particularly at Skyline, that if you didn't come to class, they would dock your grade. Even if you were going on a field trip or if you had to travel someplace with your parents. I thought that was so ridiculous. Anyway, the students would have their homework lessons. They knew what was required of them to pass the class to get an "A." They had their assignments ahead of time. So, it was just a superb job of

planning, in order to handle all of this. So I learned a lot from Jean on that. She was a super organizer.

01-02:02:02
Wilmot: So you and Jean really put that together.

01-02:02:04
Smith: Yeah, we put it together. Then when her husband got his degree and they left, the principal told me I could pick my own partner. I could interview the teachers who came in, in order to select somebody I could work with.

01-02:02:20
Wilmot: That's pretty incredible.

01-02:02:21
Smith: Yes. Because as a team person, you needed somebody who would be part of a team. A lot of team-teaching failed because the two people don't get along.

01-02:02:35
Wilmot: Don't know how to work together?

01-02:02:38
Smith: Yeah. And so I picked a man who had been teaching math, I think, at Castlemont or someplace. We taught together for fifteen years after that. He was a nice guy. He was easy to teach, to work with, but he was not a mover-and-shaker as Jean was. He wasn't as creative. He would just do what you told him to do. He was a sweet guy; the kids—the students loved him. He never pushed them. He never expected much of them. So, I'd have to re-grade—I'd have to grade the tests because I knew that he would just give the Chinese kids "As" and the black kids "Cs". I'm not kidding. A teacher in chemistry did that, too.

01-02:03:31
Wilmot: Was he white?

01-02:03:33
Smith: Yeah. He wasn't prejudiced at all. That's his life experience. So he would just look at a paper, and if it didn't fit exactly what he had in his head, he would count it wrong. And it could be right, but come from a different direction, he never took the time to really read a lot. Whereas, if it were a Chinese kid, he knew it was going to be right anyway, you know. It's just this attitude the teachers had toward student achievement and student capabilities.

01-02:04:14
Wilmot: Based on race—based on race and ethnicity.

01-02:04:16
Smith: Yeah. It's so debilitating to the students because they don't get pushed, you know. So, anyway, I would have to re-grade the papers. But he was easy to work with, and we were friends. I could take MESA [Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement] students on field trips whenever I wanted to and know that class would be run properly. I prepared all of the lessons ahead of time, all the assignments ahead of time, graded most of the tests, prepared most of the tests. He liked it, and we got along well.

[laughter] For fifteen years, we were good buddies. It worked out. It worked out very well. It gave me a chance to do a lot of things that I wouldn't have been able to do if I hadn't been team-teaching because as a team, I did not have to be in the classroom every day, all the time, to know that the lesson would go on, and the students would not be cheated by having a lot of subs who didn't know what they were doing. When a substitute came in, the sub would just be working with him. And he knew what to do.

01-02:05:51
Wilmot: Okay, so team-teaching meant you'd still have a class size of how many?

01-02:05:56
Smith: Double.

01-02:05:58
Wilmot: So you'd actually have maybe seventy kids?

01-02:06:00
Smith: Mm-hm. One time we had ninety.

01-02:06:02
Wilmot: So that's team-teaching, okay.

01-02:06:05
Smith: You just combine two classes.

01-02:06:07
Wilmot: Yeah. I understand that. I think I was trying to grasp if there was a better teacher-to-student ratio or not.

01-02:06:19
Smith: No, we'd be the same teacher-to-student. If I had twenty-five students assigned to me and she had twenty-five students, then the team class would be fifty. It only meant that when we introduced a new subject, we would introduce it to the entire group of fifty, let's say, or sixty or seventy or eighty, whatever it was. Then, when we had lab sessions for two days, then we would break them into smaller groups, and we would have a teacher in each of the groups, or a student teacher running each of the groups, so that they actually had more attention at those times. And they would have assignments that they would be working on in class.

The important thing about math, that I've learned about teaching it, is that math is a language, like a foreign language. The way to be successful in math is to speak that language, to talk about the math with another person or other people. There are so many teachers who just put the assignment on the board, hand you the book, and say, "Sit there and work." They never talk—discuss the math, do not let the students talk to each other. Even when I was a student, myself, in elementary or in high school, I never had a teacher like that. We were always allowed to talk to each other and discuss problems. And that is an important thing about math. We always—later on, I started using grouping within the classroom.

01-02:08:25
Wilmot: I have one last question for today because I think we're at the end of our time. When you began teaching at Oakland Tech, who were your students?

01-02:08:40
Smith: At Tech, I had a more diverse group of students. The first few years, they were mostly white, a few black students, fewer Asian students, even fewer Latino students, and a sprinkling of non-English speaking students. And as I've said, I've had blind students. As the years wore on, from 1961, by the time I left in '78, most of the students were black, in the school. But still, in geometry, maybe they were fifty-fifty, something like that.

01-02:09:38
Wilmot: Interesting.

01-02:09:40
Smith: A lot more Asians go to Tech now.

01-02:09:43
Wilmot: Okay. As far as their backgrounds, in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds?

01-02:09:53
Smith: Well, as I said, when they opened Skyline, Highway 13 became the dividing line. But below Highway 13, you have Broadway Terrace, which is one of the more affluent areas of Oakland. All of those students were in the Oakland Tech district. And when Skyline High opened, quite a few of their parents opted to try to get their children into Skyline. Some of them succeeded, and some of them still sent their students to Tech. So I taught a lot of students who grew up in that area in the sixties. But by the seventies, almost none of those students were coming to Tech. They were going either to private schools, Catholic schools, or Skyline. Then, Oakland Tech district went all the way down until it touched the district that of McClymonds High School. So probably to San Pablo or just below San Pablo in Oakland, it went all the way to the Berkeley border, so it took in all of Rockridge. And most of those students continue to come. There was a large Italian—Tech was in a large Italian area at that time.

01-02:11:30
Wilmot: Yes. I remember, there's a name for it that the real estate agents have resurrected.

01-02:11:34
Smith: Temescal.

01-02:11:36
Wilmot: Temescal, yes.

01-02:11:38
Smith: It went all the way to Chinatown. So all the students from Chinatown came. But there weren't that many in those days. Then, in the seventies, as Chinese students got more affluent, and there were more of them, the more middle-class Chinese moved out of Chinatown and into the Oakland High School district. So Oakland High became the school of choice for the middle-class Chinese students. And I think today, Oakland Tech might have a high percentage of Vietnamese.

01-02:12:31
Wilmot: Mm-hmm. That's true. Well, on that note, let's close for today.

01-02:12:34
Smith: Okay.

Henry Allen Perry Family, photo taken in late 1944 or early 1945, before Henry went overseas. (L-R) Back row: David, Henry, James; Front row: Christina, Benjamin, Mary, Mom and Dad.

INTERVIEW 2: NOVEMBER 13, 2002
[Minidisc 2]

01-00:00:04
Wilmot: Today is November thirteenth, and I'm here with Mary Perry Smith. This is interview number two.

Just to begin, in the last interview, we were talking about team-teaching. I wanted to talk to you today about MESA and about the birth of MESA. I'm wondering if you could kind of describe your involvement with MESA from its founding to currently. It's a big question.

00:00:52
Smith: It's interesting we talked about team-teaching because it was team-teaching that, in a way, led to my being involved with MESA. I was one of the teachers that the University of CaliforniAs Education Department assigned student teachers to on a regular basis. So the people at the university knew the math program at Oakland Tech very well. It seems that MESA started because a professor of engineering named Wilbur Somerton, who was a professor in petroleum engineering, had a lot of corporate representatives coming to him always asking for his graduates, trying to recruit them to work for their companies. After the affirmative action executive order that President Johnson signed in 1968, these recruiters began to ask for persons of color. And for the first time, this professor noticed that he had no African American students in his classes or Latino or Native American Indian. He had black students, but they were all from the Caribbean or Africa. So, he went to a person named Bill Somerville, who at that time was head of outreach at Berkeley and was one of the persons who helped to start Upward Bound. And he asked Bill Somerville what was going on and why was this happening. So Bill Somerville said, "I don't know, but let me find out."

So he went around to schools in this area and interviewed teachers of mathematics and the black students who were in their advanced classes. One of the schools he came to was Oakland Tech. And I was one of the teachers that he interviewed. I referred him to a couple of my black students who were in advanced math, that he interviewed—or were in geometry, and that was it. But later, I guess in 1969 or early on, he came back to the school with a proposal to start a program that he called MESSAP. I've forgotten what it stands for. Mathematics Engineering Science Students Achievement Program. He said that he wanted Tech to be the pilot school for this program. He was talking with the principal, and the principal told him to talk to me, because he said that he would assign me to this program. That's how I got involved.

So the outline of the program actually came from the UC Berkeley office—I've forgotten what it was called at that time, but it was the outreach office. It wasn't a very active or big organization, the way—I can't say it wasn't active, but it was not a large operation at that time. So Bill Somerville, in the outreach office, met with Bill Somerton, Professor Somerton, on a regular basis to try to implement the program. They set up meetings by bringing together people from the university: Professor Morrison, who was in physics, black professor, Harry Morrison. And a professor from mathematics whose name I don't recall. He was not black.

00:06:15
Wilmot: Was it Professor [Leon] Henkin?

00:06:19
Smith: Could have been. Somerton formed an advisory committee to kind of start the program. I was involved in the meetings with them, which was interesting. So, when they got ready, when the program was fully described in terms of which students would be involved and what their involvement would be, I was very active in saying that, first of all, students would be selected on the basis of their interest in math and science. It would not be a remedial program. And that we would select students in the tenth grade geometry class, which was the first level at that time, the high school was ten, eleven, and twelve. They would be students who were already college bound, and who expressed an interest, which showed that they liked math or science and would like to do something with that interest. Then, what we would do with the program would be to help them achieve those goals.

Because what the outreach person Bill Somerville found out when he interviewed African American students on campus—he found out that several of the university students he interviewed had been interested in careers in engineering and science, had actually enrolled in Berkeley as majors in engineering or science, but could not pass calculus. That was a stumbling block. They did not know from anything that they had learned in high school that calculus was a prerequisite. Nor had they taken, necessarily, a lot of them, the advanced math courses in trig and algebra two, because the university only required that you complete algebra, geometry, and then—I don't think they even required a third a year of mathematics. So most students who were going to college, and particularly if they were students of color, the counselors would say, "Oh, don't take chemistry, don't take physics, don't take advanced math. Take physiology or some less difficult course in math or science that will fulfill those requirements for getting into the university." The idea was, counselors were helping them keep their grade point average so they would be accepted. But what the counselors didn't do was to ask those students what they wanted to major in when they got to college.

So Somerville, in student outreach, picked that up from the students by interviewing students at the university and in the high school. The students in the high schools were taking math, but hadn't a clue as to what they wanted to do with it. So the program was designed specifically to fill that gap, to let the students in high school understand what they could do with their talent and interest in math and science. Then the program would design activities and support systems that would help them achieve those goals. That was the basic premise of the MESA program.

When we got started, after we all agreed that this was the way the program would go, it was very easy to select the students. Because ever since we started the team-teaching, the very first thing Jean and I would do, and then my partner after that—the very first thing we would do would be we'd have all of our students in all of our team classes, and we got the entire math department actually, to have the students complete survey forms, and basically to list all the courses they were enrolled in that semester, and at the same time list their hobbies, their goals, career goals or educational goals. So we had that information on all of the students who were currently enrolled in math, anyway. And it came in very handy when MESA started because then it was easy to identify the students who were our target students, whose hobbies or interests or expressed interest,

goals, fit our program. And we could then invite them to come in, talk to them about what we were doing, and ask if they wanted to be involved. So that's how we started out selecting the students.

But before the program started, I insisted that we have the money to operate the program for three years. This was something that I learned because maybe three years before MESA started, there was a program called Pre-Tech that also came out of the university. The idea was to take boys of all colors, who were average or above students who had lost interest in school, and put them all together in one class, and have them take all of their academic subjects together, and to try to focus the curriculum on their interest, while still teaching them math and science. It was going really well, I was one of the teachers who taught math, and it wasn't easy teaching a class of all boys in high school, who were constantly playing games and pulling tricks. Of course, they got to be very good at it because they had all their academic classes together. So, before they got to me, they had had time to sort of plan out what they were going to do before they got to my class. But it was a lot of fun, and they have turned out well. I still see some of them around.

But what happened, that program ran out of money after we did all that work: curriculum, select the students to participate in the program. The program died after two years. So, I told the university I was not going to get involved in another program that came in, and there was another program that we started working on even before that that never did get the money. You talk to the students about it, and you get them all excited, then the university was not able to produce. So, this was a third go-around, and I just said, "Until you have the money in hand, there will be no mention of this to the students. And no students will be selected until we know we have the funding for three years."

Because this program was set up as a scholarship incentive program, originally. Every student in the program got a basic stipend of $25 every grading period. Then, they could earn as much as $125 per semester, dependent on their grades. So, they could earn $250 per year, depending on their grades. There were two grading periods in high school, per semester. So, the students were excited because they had $25 just by enrolling in the program. Well, the students who really went for the $125, who worked to get their grades up, were the ones who actually succeeded in the long run. We required the students to take geometry, advanced math, and trig and pre-calculus, chemistry, physics, and three years of academic English. In order to stay in the program, it was necessary for them to enroll in those classes and pass them. Then, if they had difficulty, we provided study assistance, and we had tutors, which were picked, provided, and recruited by the MESA program.

Again, the team situation made all of this possible. It just played into this because we already had Tuesday and Thursday after-school study sessions at school. And we were already using our students in the advanced classes as tutors of students in algebra and geometry. We had already set up a policy in the math department for those students to get extra credit for tutoring. So, we had an ongoing study session. There was no excuse for a student not to get help if they needed it. In addition to the fact, as a math teacher, I was available whenever I had free time during the day or after school to assist not only the MESA students, but all of my students. It was just part of what I did. I was also able to recruit the teachers in physics and chemistry to come in periodically and help.

So all these things were going on anyway. But when MESA came along, we were better able to focus it on these students. That's, I guess, basically how the program worked at Tech in the beginning. The university provided tutors, they provided field trips, they provided the scholarship funds, because the concept of the program was: "As a student, your job is to study, not to get an after-school job at McDonald's. So what we're going to do is basically try to pay you as much as you would get at McDonald's to get an 'A', but they have to be 'As' in these subjects. An 'A' in gym doesn't count, you know, an 'A' in art doesn't count, or anything else you do. But these specific subjects were the ones, and those were the only ones that we give you credit for."

00:19:50

Wilmot: What was the logic of the stipend? I wasn't sure if it was incentive or if it was to offset the work that many people probably did have to do in high school, after-school jobs.

00:20:06

Smith: Well, the concept even went further than that. People who are college graduates always provide—parents provide incentives for their children to do well. If they have money, they do it through—they give their children an expense account, which they probably augment for good behavior or good work. They give them presents. They take them on trips. All of these are rewards that parents have learned to give students, their children, for good work in school. [laughs] Some of them even get cars when they learn to drive. But children from poor families don't have that. Their parents can't provide them with incentives or rewards for outstanding work. So the concept of this program is the MESA program will do for these students what parents who have the means and the education would normally do for their students. That basically was the idea behind the incentive awards.

Unfortunately, with the expansion of the program—and I do not agree with this—the incentive awards are given to the teachers now, and not to the students. I always said from the beginning that once they start paying teachers stipends to work with MESA, then it will become so expensive that they spend all their time raising money, which is what they have to do. They get a lot of state support, but if the state support ever left—you can't go back. Once you pay teachers to do this work, you can't go back and say, "Now we want you to volunteer your time." The wonderful thing about MESA in the beginning is that all of us volunteered our time. And the reward we got was in seeing our students do well. And the teachers never complained and were really excited about being able to reward their students for achievement, you know.

There were some people who objected. Some people in industry or some teachers who were not connected to this program or just critics of the program. First of all, the critics were opposed to targeting our target group—African Americans, Mexican Americans—not the whole Latino population as they do now—and American Indians. Because these were the most underrepresented groups of any historically underrepresented groups in the math and science professions. So, the idea is if you get enough people within those communities who are actually working as scientists and mathematicians and engineers, then so will their children and their grandchildren and their nephews and cousins. But those people don't live, still don't, in the communities where people of color live. So the kids don't know that they can be engineers. That was the philosophy behind targeting these many students.

Also, the people objected to our incentives, they said that we were paying students for grades. Well, in this country, and I'm sure everywhere it's possible, parents have always paid their children for getting good grades. And there's nothing wrong with that. They say, "You should get your good grades simply because—there should be some intrinsic value that makes you work for good grades just for yourself." But for young people, they don't know what their future is. So, the idea is—I mean, that's part of being an adult. That's part of being a teacher. That's part of being a parent—to guide the young people in a direction that you know will help them to live an enjoyable and fruitful life. Of course, they can't see all of that when they're young, so incentives is one of the time-honored ways of encouraging young people to go in a particular direction. We just listened to the criticism and kept doing what we had to do.

00:26:10
Wilmot: What areas did the criticism come from? Who were the critics?

00:26:12
Smith: Mostly from whites in the valley, when we expanded to the valley.

00:26:20
Wilmot: The Central Valley?

00:26:22
Smith: The Central Valley. But that was only later on after we expanded in '77. The original program at Oakland Tech started in the winter semester—second semester of 1970. We selected the students in January 1970. We got the grant from Van Loben Sels Foundation maybe around December or November 1969. So we went full steam ahead and selected twenty-five students to participate in the program. Our first graduates were in June of 1970, but they had not had a chance to be in the program long enough for us to say that we really influenced them. But if you talk to them, they will say yes, they were taking math, and yes, they were taking science, but maybe they had thought about engineering or a scientific field but hadn't a clue as to how to get there and what makes it good. Even in that short period, we were able to help them focus on a particular direction. We took them on field trips.

The wonderful thing about Professor Somerton is he had all these connections with industry—the oil industry. So when they came to recruit and they wanted graduates of color, he said, "Well, we don't have any, but we have a program and if you will donate money, then maybe we'll have some later on." But then, all of these companies were used to giving scholarships to college students and didn't want to invest money in students where it would take seven years before they ever got out of college and could work in their industries. So it was a learning curve for them. Professor Somerton kept pushing this. He pushed it nationally also with NACME [National Action Council for Minorities in Engineering], the national association for minority engineers. They also spent all of their money on scholarships for college students. They were not interested in high school students. They thought it was a waste of money, or it was too early or something. Nobody would wait that long.

00:29:36
Wilmot: And this was in 1970-71.

00:29:38

Smith: Yes. But he had been pushing, even in '68 and '69. Professor Somerton got these companies, like Chevron and Bechtel and PG&E. If they couldn't give money, then what he got them to do was to sponsor field trips. So he would arrange for the MESA students to go to those companies and then meet the engineers and the mathematicians, who would talk about their background and tour the students through the industry to show them what engineers do, what chemists do, and things of the sort. I remember one of our first trips was to the "Kremlin" of Chevron in San Francisco. It was a wonderful field trip. They took them through, in those days, showed them the computers and all the work they were doing at headquarters. They were amazed at how knowledgeable MESA students were because, you know, these were students taking advanced math and chemistry and physics. Then we went into the boardroom and sat down, and they brought in people to talk to them about how they have become engineers. They did an excellent job, but then the first question the students always ask—they raise their hand: "How much money do you make?" you know. And they couldn't get over it—these Chevron people. But over the years they've learned, because people from those industries sit on our board. So now they're prepared. [laughs] They know that that's going to be the first question.

00:31:48

Wilmot: Did they answer those questions?

00:31:49

Smith: Oh, yeah. They said—maybe not. They'd give a range, you know. They wouldn't say how much "I, personally" make. But they were absolutely shocked. This is what students want to know: "Is it worth the effort?" See, they were taking it as in a different light. What the students want to know: "If I go to all this effort, am I going to make any more money than I would if I became a social worker or a teacher or something of this sort? Because it's going to take a lot more studying."

00:32:25

Wilmot: On those field trips, when people came in to talk, how frequently did you encounter employees of those corporations who were persons of color or African American?

00:32:37

Smith: Very seldom, at first. But they would always trot out—if they had one, they would trot that person out and were very proud to do so. [laughs]

The next thing after the students visited the industries, and this was another part of MESA, Professor Somerton decided that these students needed summer jobs. And they didn't need summer jobs sweeping streets and running the copy machine. So he talked with these people in the industry at Bechtel and Chevron and PG&E and Pac Bell and got them to hire MESA high school students, fifteen and sixteen-year-old. At Tech, they were almost all black, maybe a couple of Hispanics, and I think I had two American Indian students. I'm not sure—they were at that time or they came along later. But it was such a successful experience for the companies that PG&E would take all the students we could send them, which was wonderful, for example. One of the students worked at the Lawrence Berkeley Lab, and he's still there. [laughs] I mean, he liked it so much, he stayed there—went through college, worked summers.

00:34:36
Wilmot: What's his name?

00:34:38
Smith: I can't think of his name. [Michael Blunt]

00:34:41
Wilmot: Okay.

00:34:44
Smith: One student worked for World Airways. Then she went to Berkeley, majored in math, and she kept her job at World Airways as an accountant until it closed. Other students stayed with PG&E.

There was a man named Phillip Morris, if you can imagine, who was in charge of hiring for Alameda Naval Air Station. They had a co-op program, and they wanted every MESA student they could get to be a part of that co-op program. So they would come and talk to the MESA students in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade, try to get them to sign up for summers at the naval air station in high school and then pay their way. Well, co-op means that the place where you are working will pay for your college education, but you must promise to spend your summers there and maybe one semester every other year, take off one semester every other year to work full-time. In other words, you take five years to go through college. Of course, most of the kids take five years anyway. [laughs] So, it was a five-year program, but in the end, you had a job and you had all of your expenses paid all the way through. Those programs are still going, you know.

It was a real eye-opener for the students who were in Tech, because once they got up out in the work world, and they came back to Tech, then they became the leaders. They were student body presidents and senior class presidents. They knew how to manage things, they knew how to organize. They knew how to question their counselors and their teachers. They knew what they wanted out of school, and they learned that in MESA and from all the people we would bring in to talk to them. We had another segment of MESA, which was college counseling, so representatives from the universities would come in and talk to them about how to apply for college. And then MESA hired a person to work with each student one-on-one with their financial aid packages and college application.

00:37:40
Wilmot: How did MESA work with the existing college counseling that was available in the OUSD [Oakland Unified School District]?

00:37:50
Smith: The nice thing about MESA—it started out working with a teacher, who was a regular math teacher. And since I was the advisor to the students, it was my responsibility to see that they got the right counseling, that they were in the right classes, and that they kept their grades up. So this was true of all of the MESA advisors who were doing a good job throughout the state. When I talked with the counselors, we all talked to the counselors, we give them a list of the MESA students, we tell them that they are to let us know if any of their grades drop, or whatever happens to the students. If the students have any academic problems, we let them know what we expect of them. In other

words, we don't allow the counselors to misadvise them. And the counselors were always extremely cooperative.

Also, I talked to the academic teachers in chemistry and physics and English, and the other teachers in the math department who taught calculus or pre-calculus or courses that I was not teaching. We all worked together. And one way to get the whole school tied in with MESA was to also periodically, instead of going on the field trips myself, I would get the chemistry teacher to go or the physics teacher or one of the other teachers to go. And then I would take their classes. I don't think we ever had a sub. In other words, because I was able to involve all the teachers, the counselors, in caring for the students, it was never a problem. And the principal was one of these guys who, at that time, everybody downtown in the central office was afraid of, because evidently he'd grown up in the Oakland School District. I think he's a native Oaklander, and he knew everybody in town. If they did something he didn't like, he'd just go in and tell them what he thought of them, what he wanted, and what he was going to do, and that was it.

00:40:46
Wilmot: Do you recall his name?

00:40:48
Smith: Bill Miller. He also tried to do that with teachers, so a lot of teachers were afraid of him. But because of MESA, which made him look good, I got everything I needed out of him. I'd get a sub if I needed it, I'd get a bus if I needed it. He was very cooperative, and the MESA students, you know, won the most money and scholarships combined. Their total was way above the rest of the class. So, all of this made the school look good and the principal look good.

00:41:37
Wilmot: Was Bill Miller African American?

00:41:39
Smith: No. And he had a brother who was also a principal.

00:41:44
Wilmot: I want to firm up my understanding of your role at MESA. And I understand—on the web site, it says that you're co-founder, ex-officio board member, co-founder. And I wanted to know, who was Wilbur Somerton? Was he the other founder?

00:42:05
Smith: Mm-hmm.

00:42:07
Wilmot: So, he was the other co-founder.

00:42:11
Smith: Bill Somerton, Wilbur Somerton, Professor Somerton is actually the person who got the whole thing going. He's the one who said, "Why aren't there any African American students in my class?" And instead of just dropping it there, then he proactively did something about it. And what he did was to go to the student outreach office, assuming that they would know. And they said, "We don't know"—and that was Bill Somerville. And so he did the leg work to find out what was going on. And then already, since he

had already worked with or started Upward Bound, he already had a concept of an incentive program that he wanted to put into effect. A person on his staff named Beth Cobb had written this outline of this program. So she simply adapted it, and it is the model that we started with. When I started working with it, I modified it to work from the teacher's point of view.

Eventually, after the first group graduated—you know, the first group that I selected in 1970. When all those students graduated, I immediately stopped the $25 automatic stipend because it was not doing what it was supposed to do, and that was to encourage the students to earn more by working harder. Some of the students were happy with just $25. So that caused a little head-knocking between me and the students. We always told the students that the program was their program and that we listen to what they had to say about the program. So they're also the ones who changed the name from MESSAP [Mathematics Engineering Science Students Program] to MESA [Mathematics Engineering Science Achievement] students because they said that M-E-S-S-A-P sounds like "mess-up." [laughs] That's not the name of the program we want to be associated with! So, they got the name changed to MESA, and that was interesting because that happened over the summer. I don't know where I was, but we went away for the summer. When I came back, MESSAP was MESA. [laughs]

00:45:25

Wilmot: That's some good thinking. Gosh, I have so many questions for you now after everything you've just said. Let me just go to this one question about the start-up. When you said you needed to modify for teachers, what did that mean to modify for teachers? To modify the program?

00:45:52

Smith: Well, the first thing was, as a teacher, I did not want to work with a program that did not live up to what we told the students we would do for them. So, I had to make sure that the money was there, the tutors were there, the field trips were there, and all that kind of thing. I had to make sure, as a teacher, I was working with people I could trust. And when we expanded to other schools and around the states, we worked and still work with wonderful teachers. Before the program started, before any of them heard of the program, when you first talked to them, they would have the same attitude: "You know, we've been through this a hundred times. It's a wonderful concept, <u>but</u>—"

So, as a teacher, I don't want to get involved, first of all, in a program that didn't produce what we promised the students. I'd been through it a couple of times, didn't want to do it again. Secondly, I didn't want to work with a program that didn't have high standards. I mean, there were a lot of programs that came in from the government and other places to help students who were behind to help them catch up—a remedial program. Every time you deal with students of color, the first thing you think of is "remedial." But you don't think of the students in your classes, you never have time to work with one-on-one who are doing what they are supposed to do, who come in with their homework, and who are trying to get ahead and don't get any extra attention, who could achieve even more if they did, and who will probably get side-tracked. Some of them probably do not even think about college. First of all, they don't have the money. They don't have anybody in their family who's ever gone to college—that kind of thing. And yet, these are bright students. When I got them in geometry, they had already been outstanding students all the way up to high school. They had finished algebra, had

passed algebra and were in geometry. And if you're a black student, a male, the fact that a teacher in the sixth grade would track you into the academic track is remarkable, even if you have the ability. So by the time I got them, there's a lot that had gone right with these students. The concept of the program was to keep it going, which normally doesn't happen at the high school level.

00:49:12

Wilmot: I understand. So to kind of circumvent the places where there usually are lapses in the education system and support people.

00:49:23

Smith Right. And only a teacher in the school will know which counselors will misadvise a student, will know which teachers will let them get by without doing a lot of work, will know which teachers will discourage them, and can help the students work through that and not get discouraged and actually learn to fend for themselves.

A good example is Berkeley High [School], where you can enroll in geometry and not know that there may be three, four, or five different tracks of geometry. Chances are, if you're in geometry and you're black, you're in the lowest level, while the kids from the hills are all in advanced placement geometry. Same thing's true—there's a college track—quote "college track," a "good" college track, and then there is an "advanced placement college track." That's where they don't even think about placing black students or Latino students. So, if the parents aren't there to fight for them, then they never know until it's too late that their child has been tracked into a two-year algebra class. They even have two-year geometry classes at Berkeley High, I understand. But a teacher could immediately look at the student's schedule and find that that student has been sent to the wrong class, that some counselor has not put them in physics, and take care of them.

So that is one way that MESA became teacher-friendly, in the sense that we insisted that the advisor of MESA not be a counselor, which is what most programs do in the schools, but be an academic teacher in math or science. Because they're the only ones who know what math the students would be in and whether or not they have the right level.

00:52:04

Wilmot: Did you run into resentment then from the schools? I understand that your school was very supportive, but did you run into resentment maybe when the program expanded, from others who felt that they were being cut out of something? Because you had advisors who were not from the schools but were actually MESA advisors?

00:52:28

Smith: No, all of them were teachers in the school. The MESA advisor is a teacher in the school, and by definition, when we started the program, we said that that MESA advisor had to be a teacher of academic math or science. That's why the program has been successful. Somewhere along the line, some of our own staff, who are called center directors, have allowed schools into the program who have not assigned a math or science teacher to be MESA advisors. And that is not productive, unless that advisor has been a math or science teacher. Sometimes in schools like that the program does not always work well. But when we defined which schools we would go into, when we

expanded, we wanted a school, first of all, they had to have a school that taught physics and chemistry and pre-calculus math and academic English—four years of academic English. Why have a MESA program with a school that doesn't teach chemistry? [laughs] I mean, it doesn't make sense. So, there were certain requirements for the schools we went into. Secondly, you go into a school which has our target population as their major enrollment. And thirdly, they needed a math or science teacher who would volunteer to be advisor to the program. Those were requirements that we started with in the program.

00:54:34
Wilmot: I want to ask you this Van Loben Sels Foundation—the initial commitment, a three-year commitment, how much was that? That grant?

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Smith: I think it was only $10,000.

00:54:47
Wilmot: Each year, or over three years?

00:54:49
Smith: I think over three years. So, it was about $3,500 a year that we were spending on student stipends, because everything else was donated.

00:55:00
Wilmot: And how quickly did those donations from corporations materialize?

00:55:04
Smith: The field trips? Professor Somerton got them right away. So actually, some of the MESA students, the juniors or the seniors had summer jobs—the summer of '70, as I recall.

00:55:27
Wilmot: Wow. I'm wondering also about, in 1977 when MESA expanded, you'd been founder, instructor, advisor—what did your role become with the expansion of MESA?

00:55:43
Smith: Well, after Oakland Tech, MESA went to Kennedy High. Elois Irvin then became the second MESA advisor.

00:56:00
Wilmot: Irvin?

00:56:03
Smith: I-r-v-i-n. [spells the name]. She's a black woman, math teacher. An angel, really—wonderful person. She stayed a MESA advisor until she died, over twenty-five years. And then, after Kennedy High—that was 1972, I think, we started at Kennedy.

00:56:37
Wilmot: Where is Kennedy?

00:56:39

Smith: Richmond. Then in 1973, the program took in Berkeley High. It had never been as successful as it should be at Berkeley High. And Berkeley High is a school that really, really needs a MESA program. The teachers in math and science are almost all white in the academic subjects, and they do not want to be bothered with working with our target population. They did have one woman who taught chemistry who was the advisor for a while, they had one algebra teacher, a black male, who was an advisor for a while. But the first teacher was a white teacher in math who was very active with the science fair. I had known him for years because he had run the science fair in the Bay Area. He also was active with a national organization that was a next step above the science fair. The name escapes me, but the students, let's say, who won a science fair year after year, this was where you could take your project if you continued to work with that project or get a new project that was more complicated. And the students would have to present this project in person to a group or professionals in the field. So it combined not only the hands-on work but also learning to talk about what you were working with and to discuss it with a group of academics. I thought that was a wonderful idea and something that hopefully we would get, first some of the MESA students participating in the science fair and then in this junior science—whatever it was—national program and then to the Westinghouse National Science Competition. It hasn't happened yet, but that was something that we had always hoped for. But he was the first MESA advisor at Berkeley High. He was very good at doing that kind of thing.

01:00:01

Wilmot: Would you say his name one more time?

01:00:03

Smith: I didn't give you his name because I can't remember. [laughs] [Bob Rice]

01:00:07

Wilmot: That's fine.

01:00:09

Smith: Maybe I will think of it. But he was very active in science circles, and after he retired from Berkeley High, he worked at the Lawrence Hall of Science. In fact, his model for that junior science program became the model for what we call today our MESA Day, which is another concept I'll have to tell you about. [laughs]

01:00:39

Wilmot: You know we could have many interviews talking about MESA. I can see that now.

01:00:43

Smith: [laughs]

01:00:46

Wilmot: So after those first three schools—and I'm sorry—did you say what year Berkeley High School?

01:00:51

Smith: Berkeley High came in '73, I think it was.

01:00:54

Wilmot: 1973, the year after Kennedy High School.

01:00:58

Smith: Right. And then when we had three schools, then it was necessary for us to talk with one another. So Professor Somerton set up an advisory committee. I was on that advisory committee, and he invited representatives from industry on the advisory committee. And I think one of them was a MESA parent who worked at Bechtel or someplace. We would meet periodically and talk about what the program needed and fundraising and things of that sort, where we could get money, and what was going on at the various schools. So I continued to be a teacher and MESA advisor and a member of the advisory committee.

And then one day, the head of the engineering department from Howard who then went to Carnegie Foundation, was in the Bay Area and Professor--either Bill Somerville or Professor Somerton asked if he could come and address the MESA students at Oakland Tech. This is about 1975 or '76. I said, "Sure," because we had MESA meetings once a week during what we called—we had kind of a morning break for twenty minutes. And we would come together and talk about various things.

01:03:09

Wilmot: Within the school, not the three schools?

01:03:12

Smith: Within Tech. Kennedy High had this schedule where they go to certain classes, block classes. They had a different system. But at Tech, the students petitioned years ago and got a morning twenty-minute break in the day. And that's when all the "clubs" met. At that time, I must have had a room full. I must have had thirty or forty students in MESA.

He came, and he talked to them, and they asked questions, and he went away just blown away by the students. So when he was at Carnegie, he proposed—I think it was Carnegie—expanding the MESA program to other places. They were going to give us a grant. So we discussed it in our advisory committee meeting, board meeting or whatever it was, and decided we didn't want to expand because we weren't sure when you expanded that you would keep the same quality of the program and all that kind of stuff.

But then we got another offer a year later from the Hewlett Foundation. Bill Hewlett had set up a foundation—only had one person working for it part-time. He was a graduate student, and Mr. Hewlett told him he got tired of flying black students in from engineering schools in the South and on the East Coast and Midwest and wondered why in the largest state in the country, he didn't have applicants from California. What was wrong? He said, "Find me a program I can put some money into that will help develop engineers in California." So this guy went around and talked to people all over the country and selected the MESA model. So then he came to the board and said that Bill Hewlett wanted to fund the expansion of our model. We thought about it, and then we decided to give it a try, but we set up certain conditions, and again, the conditions were that they would give us the money to expand the program, and the money would have to last for a minimum three years. So that any school we went into, we would say, "If you join this program, we can promise you that the students you select today, that the money will last at least through the graduation of the 10th grade class," since the students were selected in the 10th grade geometry class. That was one condition that we put in, and

then I guess Carnegie put up a matching amount. So we started out with about a million dollars right away.

01:06:58
Wilmot: This is in 1976?

01:07:01
Smith: '77.

01:07:04
Wilmot: By the time it came together.

01:07:06
Smith: Let's see, yeah. And what Bill Somerton did—you see, the model for the school level was basically what the MESA advisors were doing in the school. We had been doing it now—I had been doing it for seven years, and the other teachers also were carrying it out. So we were pretty sure of what worked and didn't work, and we have worked out the bugs at that level. Then what do you do to expand it? And Bill Somerton, who had done everything—he had been the person who set up the field trips, who helped to raise the money, chaired the advisory committee, got summer jobs for the kids, was the contact with industry, hired the people for tutoring, helped students apply for scholarships.

Well, one of the things that we had done was to say that if you have a program, the University of California had a program, that we could not ask the teachers to do all this work. That the idea of MESA was that these are services that supported the teachers' contacts with the students and that it made it possible for the teachers to help more students. They didn't have to worry about having to find tutor, and if the students needed it, they didn't have to worry about calling up, trying to schedule field trips. There would be a person who would be paid. That was his job or her job, and that person eventually was the one who was called the MESA center director.

01:09:10
Wilmot: Per school?

01:09:11
Smith: No. That person was hired at UC Berkeley and made all of the arrangements for the three schools that we had. So when Professor Somerton set up the model for the state, he said, first of all, "I'm a professor of engineering, and I run the MESA program. I'm the PI for the program. It is operated out of the UC Berkeley engineering department. And this is the model we want to use around the state. We want the engineering departments in universities to sponsor the program. We want a full, tenured professor, because if you're working for tenure, you don't have time to do all this volunteer work. We want a full, tenured professor, preferably the department head or the head of the engineering college or whatever to be the PI for the program. They will hire a full-time staff person who will then run the MESA program out of the engineering department. They will select the schools according to our criteria in their areas and work with those schools."

Professor Somerton set up a meeting at the Lawrence Hall of Science and invited the chairs of the engineering departments around the state—UC, state universities, and

private colleges—to come and listen to a presentation of MESA: what it was about, what it had accomplished, and the fact that it had funding to expand, and where we wanted to expand, and how a university could be selected to run a program. He made it like we will select who will run the program. And he invited a man who was then the vice president of NACME to be the keynote speaker. This was a guy named Bob Finnell. We met him a year earlier because he had come out from NACME to just meet with our board because he had heard about the program and to talk to us about expanding the program. He was nice, yeah—but he was a very dull speaker, we thought. [laughs] Nice guy. Interesting. The typical East Coast attitude. Actually, he's from San Antonio or someplace. But Bob Finnell was remarkable, because his father is Irish and his mother was Mexican. He grew up right on the borders speaking both. So he was bilingual.

We thought—at least I thought, "God it's going to be really dull to have Bob Finnell out here giving the keynote address." But he was good; he was very good. So after this was done, then it was necessary to invite the universities to apply for being in the MESA program. You set up an RFP [Request for Proposals], you set up the guidelines for the applications. They had to show that they can meet all of these requirements, which had to do with having high schools that they thought would be interested in working with the program. The universities had to be willing to hire a full-time person. They had to be willing to give office space for the MESA program.

01:14:02
Wilmot: This is really interesting strategy. So you really started satellite—

01:14:07
Smith: Instead of running everything out of Berkeley, you see, Professor Somerton set up—what he did was replicate the model at Berkeley. The idea was the program has prestige because it has a university behind it.

01:14:31
Wilmot: Very good thinking. Excellent thinking.

01:14:36
Smith: Very smart thinking. Because that makes the original—immediately, when you go to a high school and talk to the principal, or you go talk to a superintendent and you are a professor at the university, it makes a difference. Secondly, instead of having the program run out of the district office, the idea is that this person works for the university. So, all of these things, Bill Somerton was so smart when he set it up that way.

01:15:19
Wilmot: Was that thinking something you developed with him or the advisory board developed together?

01:15:26
Smith: I can't tell you. I don't remember, but I assume that it came from Bill, yeah. And that this is just the way he operates. He was an engineer, he had a model, and he replicated the model. We did, of course, talk about the RFP and the guidelines. Yes, I did work with him on that. He would come to the meetings and he would say, "Well, why don't

we do this? Why don't we call a meeting?" And we did discuss it in the advisory committee.

01:16:06
Wilmot: And this all with $350,000 from the Hewlett Foundation and $250,000 from the Carnegie Mellon Foundation?

01:16:11
Smith: Mm-hmm.

01:16:13
Wilmot: And that was for the statewide expansion?

01:16:18
Smith: We set an amount of money that each of the universities would get that would be enough to cover the stipends for a certain number of students. It covered the salary of the full-time person and covered program money for field trips and stuff. A description of the program, the director's job description—all that stuff had to be done.

Well, the first thing we had to do was to get statewide offices and hire an executive director. And lo and behold, who applied but Bob [Robert] Finnell. Norvel and I were both on the interview panel, I think as I recall. [laughs] And Bob was just far superior to anybody else that interviewed. I think that one of the reasons why the statewide program was successful, I think the main reason, is that Bob Finnell became the first executive director. And the reason why it was successful is that Bob had worked at the national level at NACME. So, he knew all of the operations at the national level of the minority engineering programs around the country. He knew every one of them. He also knew all of the industries that gave money to NACME. He knew all of the players around the country.

01:18:02
Wilmot: That's excellent. He brought in his networks.

01:18:05
Smith: Yeah. He also knew all of the mistakes they had made that made him unhappy and want to leave.

01:18:12
Wilmot: What is the "C" in NACME stand for?

01:18:16
Smith: "Committee," probably. I don't remember. It's still active.

01:18:22
Wilmot: I'll go find it. All of the names that you don't remember, I can find.

01:18:26
Smith: Yeah, sure. He could type seventy words a minute. [laughs] He came in, and he got space in the Lawrence Hall of Science, and then he hired me. I was still teaching. We hired him, and then he hired me to do the program. Then he got to work doing the rest of it, setting up the RFP, meeting with the industry people, meeting with the engineering

deans. He and Professor Somerton would meet with the engineering professors who wanted to sponsor the program. So they did a lot of traveling.

I spent the summer of '77 writing—Bob Finnell said, "We need a handbook."

01:19:36

Wilmot: Did you leave your Oakland Tech job as a teacher to take that job?

01:19:39

Smith: No. At that time. Because they hired me—we hired Bob Finnell the day of the MESA banquet. This is another thing I haven't mentioned and that is, from the beginning, at the end of the school year, we'd get all of the students together in MESA, and we would honor our graduates. I would have each of the graduates tell the rest of the students where they were going to college, how much money they'd earned in scholarships, and all that kind of stuff. It was very inspirational. Then Professor Somerton said instead of having just tea and cookies at Tech, that we should take them out to dinner. So we took them to a spaghetti place, you know, where you could get a meal for $2 or $3 a piece.

Then, in 1977, the class of '77 said—they were always telling us what they wanted to do, you know. The MESA students, as soon as they found out they could pass trig, then they felt they could tell the world what to do. So they said, "What we're going to do this year is we're not going to have a MESA banquet for the Oakland Tech graduates. We're going to have a MESA banquet that includes Kennedy High and Berkeley High." Because they all talk to each other. We'd go on field trips together and stuff. They decided that they wanted to collaborate with the other students. So I said, "Fine, go ahead. But you guys arrange it." So they selected a representative from Tech, a representative from each of the other two schools, and they'd meet once a month, and they would plan how much they would charge, where it would be, who would be their main speaker, all that kind of stuff. All I had to do was show up. They chose H's Lordship's, and they had just a wonderful program, a wonderful dinner. They did the whole program, you know. All I did was announce the scholarships. One of the MESA graduates, the emcee, they chose their speaker. They had a favorite woman engineer, PhD black woman.

01:22:39

Wilmot: What was her name?

01:22:43

Smith: Sorry. [laughs]—that they had met. And they were just nuts about her. "Oh, if we could just get her to come be our speaker." And of course she did come. That was the day we selected Bob Finnell to be executive director. I said, "Hey, come to the MESA banquet." He was blown away by it. He had never seen the MESA students, you know.

So anyway, Bob Finnell hired me and made me the statewide program coordinator—at that time, it was called later director. My job was to train all the teachers and center directors—go out and talk to the teachers directly and tell them what MESA was about and help them problem solve. But he said they need a handbook, so I spent the summer just sitting down, writing everything I had done. At the Lawrence Hall of Science, you

had all of the support you needed for editing, for graphics, for printing. It was wonderful.

01:24:01
Wilmot: So Lawrence Hall of Science really stepped up and became a real partner.

01:24:04
Smith: Always.

01:24:05
Wilmot: And home for MESA.

01:24:07
Smith: Right. That's where we were until about the eighties, when we moved to the university headquarters—the Office of the President, where we are now.

01:24:21
Wilmot: And that's in downtown Oakland?

01:24:23
Smith: Mm-hmm. So that's what I did all summer. Then I said, "I cannot"—because I was hired the last week of school, I said, "I can not leave Tech with nobody to run the MESA program. That would not be right." I could leave Tech, and they'd hire somebody to teach the math classes. But they really didn't have anybody who could run the MESA program at that time because in '77, the summer of '77, Oakland Tech moved to the old Merritt College campus, while the building on Broadway was being retrofitted for earthquake-proofing and remodeling.

01:25:15
Wilmot: And that was—?

01-01:25:09
Smith: 1977.

01:25:12
Wilmot: And that was after Norvel had left.

01:25:17
Smith: Yes. They moved to the hills. Merritt College moved to the hills in '71.

01:25:22
Wilmot: And he was no longer president there?

01:25:24
Smith: He was at Berkeley.

01:25:26
Wilmot: He moved on to Berkeley.

01:25:28
Smith: And it had been abandoned, so it was really a mess. Nobody had been there since Merritt had moved. And so they had a bit of renovation to do, and most of the classes were in temporary bungalows, whatever they called them, portables.

01:25:49
Wilmot: And this is where Oakland Tech moved temporarily?

01:25:51
Smith: Mm-hmm. The summer of '77. So, '77-'78 school year, I worked 50 percent time for MESA and 50 percent time for Tech. In the morning, I would go to Tech and teach; in the afternoon, I'd go to the Lawrence Hall of Science. And sometimes, I'd go to Tech in the morning, and then I'd hop on PSA and fly to LA and meet with teachers. That was the Southwest Airlines in those days. [laughs] That was before Southwest, there was PSA. And I'd fly back, or I would fly down and spend a couple of days and then come back. But with a team partner, I could still run the team classes.

01:26:52
Wilmot: Did you still have that same person that you hired after Jean?

01:26:55
Smith: Yes. We still worked together. So that worked out, and by the end of the year, I had recruited another math teacher. Fortunately, a former student teacher at Tech in math and a graduate of Oakland Tech, who had been a member of the future teachers' club when I sponsored it was teaching there and she took over MESA for a while. But then that was a crazy year, because I was flying back and forth to LA every week practically, or driving to Sacramento, or something of that sort.

01:27:41
Wilmot: And at that point you became full-time MESA?

01:27:44
Smith: Then at the end of '78 school year, I resigned—I took a leave of absence from the Oakland School District and worked full-time for MESA at the Lawrence Hall of Science.

01:28:00
Wilmot: And that's why you were flying back and forth every week?

01:28:05
Smith: No. While I was teaching at Tech, I was going then when I worked full-time then, I could go to LA and spend two or three days and hit a lot of places. I didn't go every week, maybe twice a month.

01:28:27
Wilmot: Mary, I'm wondering if we could take a quick break.

01:28:31
Smith: Oh, sure. Are you ready for tea or something hot? Hot water?

[break]

01:28:40
Wilmot: Okay, we've just arrived at talking about how you took a leave of absence from the OUSD and became statewide program director for MESA. And that was in 1978? 1977?

01:29:02

Smith: Yeah. 1977, I was part-time statewide program director and then, in 1978 at the end of school, I became full-time.

01:29:14

Wilmot: I just had some back-up questions, just to go back. I had some questions to ask from earlier on. The first question I had—you had mentioned that the start-up meetings were very interesting. And you mentioned it kind of as an aside, but I wanted to go back to those meetings when it was yourself and Wilbur Somerton and Bill Somerville when you were having those start-up meetings, talking about what MESA could be.

01:29:48

Smith: It very seldom included just the three of us. I think Professor Somerton set up an advisory committee of university professors in the sciences and engineering right away. And so I was just part of that discussion. It was just interesting because, as a teacher, you know, I never sat in on a meeting with a group of university professors that was dealing with a specific problem that related to what I was doing. So that's why it was interesting and exciting.

01:30:45

Wilmot: Okay. I wanted to ask you also, given your experience in graduate school and your training—I don't know how often theory is that helpful in real life—but if any of that theory that you learned in graduate school—did you bring it to bear in the creation of MESA? Or was it something you brought to bear all along?

01:31:23

Smith: I don't think I brought it directly to bear on the MESA program. I just think whatever I learned about education or the theory of education, the experiences of educators in past years was just a part of what I did. But I must say that I learned more by supervising student teachers who worked with their supervisors at UC Berkeley in the School of Education, who were themselves creative people and gave different ideas to the student teachers about what they could try in a classroom. I was always willing to work with them in trying out new things. And so I learned a lot from them.

But one of the most exciting things I learned from them was how to organize the class into groupings. That was a student teacher who worked with a man named Poirier—something like that—I think it was a French name. He wrote a book on learning alone and learning together. His idea is that as a teacher, you should not always stand up in front of a class and talk, as the authority, but that students learn more from each other than they do from your words as a teacher. So, the idea is to build on that in a classroom. The students do a lot of work on their own, and you can introduce topics to them in a lecture form, but then you ask students to work together in a group to solve a problem.

But the special thing that he brought to that situation was that first of all, you arrange your class in a way so that when you set up your groups, your groups are very organized. They're organized in a particular way, so that it's easy to do. So, when you set up your seating chart, you make it possible for students in the same group to just turn their chairs. So it's easier to use, and then work on problems. Even in high school, you know, you can do that. Particularly in geometry it's easy, because you can do a lot of hands-on drawing and talking about the theorems. In those days, we had lots of stuff

from the National Science Foundation that we could use for hands-on things. But the idea was every group would be five students: two "Cs", one "D" student, one "B", and one "A." And you could not set up your groups right away because you had to learn who your students were, who would be a good leader.

01:34:57
Wilmot: That's great.

01:34:58
Smith: Then the idea is that that way, every student in the class would have a chance to learn or talk about it. It was a wonderful idea.

01:35:07
Wilmot: That's really interesting.

01:35:10
Smith: Now, you know, professors at Stanford and other places have gotten great notoriety for writing books and running around the country. And this poor man who wrote the original book doesn't even get credit for it. But I learned a lot from actually teaching. I learned from my students, I learned from my colleagues, and I learned from the student teachers.

01:35:39
Wilmot: I want to ask as MESA took off in the early seventies, before it was replicated all over the state—[pause]—how did you communicate the program to student' parents, and what did parent involvement look like?

01:36:09
Smith: Well, this was very, very interesting, because again, Professor Somerton was so smart. He insisted from the very beginning that parents be involved, and they sign off on their students participating in the program. And to that end, as soon as we selected students for the program, the first thing we did was to invite their parents to a meeting. At that time, the Somertons were very active in their church. And there was a church of the same denomination on Twenty-ninth Street in Oakland.

01:36:52
Wilmot: What denomination was it?

01:36:54
Smith: Christian something. First Christian Church—I don't know. It's not Methodist or Baptist, it's United Christian, I think.

01:37:08
Wilmot: Not Unitarian either?

01:37:13
Smith: No, no. I mean, deeply religious church. They contacted the minister at this church on Twenty-ninth Street in downtown Oakland, and the women of the church cooked dinner for the MESA parents. They invited the parents there, and we presented the program to them, told them what was expected of their students and what they could expect from the program. We always invited parents to the end-of-the-year activities. Parents were a very important part of the program from the beginning. And I'm very pleased that

years later, in the eighties, we started having parent conferences. I think the year before I left MESA, we started doing parent conferences and invited parents and their students to come in for—not conferences, kind of seminars, or something. We would talk about what was required of college and study habits and all these kinds of things. So parents have always been very, very much a part of what MESA does. It's one of our components of the program. I'm glad you asked.

01:39:11

Wilmot: I wanted to ask you also about—what were some challenges that you faced in the early days of MESA?

01:39:22

Smith: Most of the challenges were the students themselves. Students are always challenging you. [laughs] The challenge was to keep them focused, keep them from getting discouraged, because they were dealing with pre-calculus and physics and chemistry. And actually, I must say that the chemistry and physics teachers at Tech were not used to having black students in their classes who did well. I remember one student practically, a male student, in tears because he didn't get the MESA incentive award because he said his chemistry teacher had cheated him out of a grade. He said he got an "A" on the test, and when he got his grade, the teacher had given him a "C." He knew he had not recorded one of his tests. So I asked him if he had a copy of the test, and he said, "No." I said, "One thing you must always remember—if you challenge a teacher, you must have every paper that's ever been graded with you. Never throw your papers away, so at the end of the year, if you do not have the grade that you think you should get, you have evidence that you did the work." He got "As" after that.

But it's the kind of thing that teachers do that underestimate the black students and the Latino students. I don't care how hard they work, they never expect them to be "A" students. And so, they will automatically grade them down, whereas for Asian students, they will grade them up. They don't know they're doing it. They can look at—my own partner in team-teaching—I would have to regrade the important exams myself. And I was amazed at how many times he counted a problem "correct," which was wrong, that an Asian student had done, or somebody he liked. And how he discounted a problem, which was not worked the way he thought it should be but really was a correct solution to the problem, a black student or a Latino student. So the challenges are within the system. These are well-meaning people who are very supportive of MESA. Good, honest people. But that's the way they work.

01:42:37

Wilmot: Well, I think that's part of the nature of racism, is that it actually affects good, honest people. And it draws a veil over their eyes.

01:42:48

Smith: They don't know what they're doing. They don't really even realize. It's so pervasive, it's so much a part of what they do. So, one of the things that was the challenge was to get the MESA students to understand that they were smart, they could do the work, and a lot of the problems they had with the teachers and in college with professors have to do with understanding the system and how to work the system, which is what a lot of good students do. The students who succeed are the ones who understand the system and make the system work for them. So, I say you can either sit down and complain and

cry about "People don't like me" or they're discriminating against you, or you can get out there and learn how to get an "A", what is expected of you, and never, you know, take less than that. That's what we teach the MESA students. And they probably, if you interview one of them, can tell you time after time how they've challenged a professor or teacher on this very kind of thing.

01:44:04

Wilmot: As a teacher, what was your strategy for conveying to someone who didn't believe that they were smart or able?

01:44:16

Smith: Simply, persistence. I'd make them stay after school and work with them. Then, when they did well on a test, I would compliment them. And you know, there are some students who it's so inbred that they can't do math, that regardless of how hard you work with them, they are so convinced. They are afraid to really try. I've had student after student come to me at the end of the year: "Oh, Mrs. Smith, now I understand it. I wish I had tried harder. I know I can do it now," you know? The hardest thing that you have is to get your students to believe in themselves that they can learn math. Because they will come up to you over and over again: "Oh, I can't learn this—too hard." So that's the biggest challenge.

Working with MESA was fun. And running around the state, having a chance to talk with other math teachers and science teachers was wonderful, because we speak a common language. The ones who choose to work with MESA were the good people who really cared about their students and had wanted for a long time to do something to help the target students, the students that MESA targeted, but nobody had ever given them any means of doing it.

01:46:04

Wilmot: Did you find that this played itself out differently across gender lines? (At Caltech?)

01:46:16

Smith: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Most of the white men teachers were very fond of the cute little Asian girls who sat on the front row and did "A" work. [laughs] Those are the ones that they would overestimate, and they would underestimate the black kids. Yeah, it played across gender lines. Since both of the teachers in those subjects were male, there weren't any females that I can compare with them.

01:47:07

Wilmot: It's clear that because people actually came to you, came to MESA, and asked MESA to expand, that there was evidence of success very early on within those first three years. I wanted to ask you, what did that look like? What did success look like?

01:47:36

Smith: Well, again, Wilbur Somerton was very wise, and after the program had run for three years—so we'd had three graduating classes—the idea was what happened to those students? Where were they? So after three years, he hired somebody to do a study, to interview all of the students who had graduated from the program at Tech, and to find out what they had done with their MESA experience. And they found that 80 percent of them, 90, I can't remember what percent of them—I think all but one or two of them were in college, doing what they said they were going to do. They were in college, and

at least 50 to 60 percent of them were in a math-based major. So, that's a study that they used for fundraising. And of course, when it got around, that was such a success story that it was hard to keep under your hat. That's how people came to us, offering us money. It wasn't just guesswork.

01:49:14

Wilmot: I have one question that I want to ask, though you've kind of touched on it in different ways. You spoke to how Professor Somerton perceived a need for a program like MESA, due to his experience in the academies. I wanted to ask you, and again you've touched on this, to what need were you responding when you helped to create MESA?

01:49:51

Smith: Professor Somerton was responding to the need in his class. Mine was simply recognizing that the program they were offering was made up of components that I believed in and knew intrinsically would work with our students. I felt that this will work. I knew my students, and I would never have thought of the incentive part of it, and I was willing to try it. I was never really supportive of the basic $25 to every student in the program. That was Bill Somerville's attitude. But as soon as I saw what it was doing to the students, I got rid of that. [laughs] That was before it expanded to the other schools, and I think that was good. But the students responded as I thought they would.

You always wish that you could take your students on field trips. You always wish that you could help the students who don't have money get summer jobs and not working at McDonald's. You wish that there would be role model speakers or people they could talk to about careers. You always are looking for ways to inspire and motivate good students, you know, who come from backgrounds where they don't get that kind of motivation.

Or the parents—they're good parents, but they just didn't go to college. They don't know. They send the children off to school and expect the schools to do good things. But they themselves don't really know when the schools are not. So they have to take the child's word for it. They do the best they can, and it's very easy to be intimidated by teachers and counselors and principals. I was just responding to what almost all of the MESA advisors respond to, and that is you never have enough help to reach all of the students that you know need help and could do better if you had more resources.

01:53:09

Wilmot: In 1977 you expanded to how many different sites?

01:53:14

Smith: I think eight.

01:53:16

Wilmot: Eight. And were there challenges associated with that growth, that time in MESA's development?

01:53:32

Smith: There were always challenges, but they were fun challenges, you know. Sacramento started a program, and the teachers were excited. They were there the summer of '77 saying, "We want to get started as soon as school opens. We want to get started right

away." Then the challenge was to keep ahead of them. As soon as they heard the model of the program, they were anxious to do it, to join and to get involved. At least one of those teachers is still a MESA advisor, only now she runs the California State University at Sacramento undergraduate program. The challenge was just training the staff. Working with the teachers was easy; it was fun. Working with the people who were hired by the university to run the program; that was the most difficult and the biggest challenge. It's still, I'm sure for MESA, a challenge because even though you hire them, you are fortunate if you could have a person who has the same commitment that the teachers have to the program, because the teachers can see it right away, and their students. You need a person who's director of the program at the university. Each university, let's say. Sacramento State University was so anxious to have a program that they joined with UC Davis, and they had both—they were a partner in the program. So, we were one of the first programs that crossed lines and formed partnerships between the University of California campuses and the State University campuses because we had both sectors in our program. And in a couple of cases, they partnered to run the MESA program because they weren't able to run one each.

So the challenge was the person they hired, let's say, to run the program: was that person a good manager? Could that person represent the program properly when they went to the schools to talk to the principals? How the program was implemented depended a lot on that person; the person really had to understand the program. For example, some of them would go out into the schools and go into the math classes and make an announcement about this wonderful new program that was going to pay the students and take them on field trips and get summer jobs. Well, everyone wanted to come except the students we wanted. That's not the way you recruit students from the MESA program. They didn't follow our procedures, which were the same ones we'd used at Tech, which was all the students in the math department fill out the survey form. From the survey form, you find out honestly what the students are interested in before you talk to them. And you select the students who are your target students. Those are the students you invite to the orientation meeting and see if they want to join.

So you get some hotshot social worker who wants to go out and save the world. So that was a challenge. Then one university hired a person who didn't believe in the program at all, and when she would go to the schools where the black students were, she'd wear a hat and white gloves and just kind of tiptoe around. Now, what kind of image was that? Actually, to get rid of her, we had to close down the whole program at that university and open it up and get another university in the area to sponsor it. Then we had one university hire an engineer who was incredible and just did a fabulous job.

So the challenge was the statewide staff and then, of course, the directors. Even though they were hired by the university, we paid their salaries. Therefore, we required them to attend training sessions. That was my job, to train them. Then I would go visit them and evaluate them and go with them to visit the schools. I never went to a school without the director. I would always say I would like to visit the schools.

01:58:58
Wilmot: Announce yourself. You didn't do surprise visits?

01:59:02
Smith: Never, no.

01:59:03

Wilmot: That's very respectful.

01:59:06

Smith: You never go in with the attitude that they want to do the wrong thing. You go in with the attitude that they really want to run a good program, they just don't know how if they're making mistakes. So the idea is to problem-solve. The nice thing about the way the program was set up statewide, is that in every area, you have to be flexible. The situations in San Diego or southwest LA are not necessarily the same as they were at Oakland Tech. So it's very important to allow them to get people who know their area and are able to make adjustments according to what works in their area, as long as they stick to the core of the program. The challenge for the executive director at MESA—and still is, and we haven't really found anybody as wise as Bob Finnell in terms of management—is that the executive director has to deal with the university system, the University of California system, the State University system, the private universities, and the state legislature. Well, except now we're in the Office of the President, and we can't deal with the state legislature. They have to deal with, I think we have sixteen different centers around the state, at least sixteen. They all have their own staff, and they all report to the PI on that campus. But most of the money—the rec money—comes from the MESA office, so they have to be supervised by the statewide program director. The executive director has to make all these little fiefdoms work and has to keep them working together and keep them happy. That's not easy, particularly when the universities hire and fire the center directors. So—it's an interesting kind of situation.

02:01:52

Wilmot: It is interesting. It sounds like there's this tension between giving the correct amount of autonomy and making sure that exists for the health of the program. And at the same time, that autonomy—there's a tension there. I can see that.

02:02:07

Smith: Yeah, and if you are the person in charge as the director, you have to be flexible. You have to be willing to have your staff get up in a meeting and say, "Look. These things aren't working. I'm not getting the support I need from the statewide office, and this is what I need if I'm going to run a good program. You can't tell me to do this." You know, all those problems now, since MESA is so big, there are a lot more problems that come from the fact that every center is sort of semi-independent. And yet, that's the strength of the program, because they're closer to the schools. They know what the schools need, and they can make decisions in their area about what works.

02:03:03

Wilmot: When was the first MESA Day?

02:03:07

Smith: We did MESA Day my last year with MESA in 1982. We did one in northern California and one in southern California. It was modeled after this science program that the MESA advisor at Berkeley High had participated in. What we did was invite all of the northern California MESA schools to send their students to Berkeley for a day of activities, and we got professors on campus in the Lawrence Berkeley Lab to open up their labs. We divided the students in groups of five, gave them a schedule, and sent them off to visit chemistry labs and Lawrence Berkeley Labs. It was wonderful, and we

had a wonderful lecture in the morning with one of these science wizards, you know, who makes things "Pop!" and go "Boom!" Then we did the one in southern California at Caltech. So that was the beginning of MESA Day. Now they've added a lot of contests. We started doing a toothpick bridge building contest, and every school had a team. And the team that won at the school, then brought it to MESA Day. Then the engineering students at Berkeley and Caltech would try to break the bridges—see which one could carry the greatest load. Professor Somerton also designed that contest, and now it's gone on to egg-dropping and other kinds of things.

02:05:23

Wilmot: This Professor Somerton sounds like such an amazing person. What kind of person was he?

02:05:29

Smith: If you saw him on the street, he was just Mr. Ordinary Man. He was a wonderful guy, just quiet—he was a family man. He was probably one of the least selfish people I've ever met. He gave his time and his talent and his heart to these students and to MESA, made it work, never asked for any recognition, never got any, really. He was nominated a couple of times for the national award that they gave to the person who's done the most to help underrepresented minority students. NACME has turned him down every time, and he's a guy who has done more than anybody I've ever known, as a result of starting this program—what he did in making it work. MESA is now replicated in ten other states and called MESA, and then there must be four or five other states that have used the model and used different names like LEAP or something.

02:07:03

Wilmot: Do you run into MESA program graduates now?

02:07:06

Smith: Oh, yes!

02:07:08

Wilmot: What's that like?

02:07:10

Smith: Wonderful. What's truly wonderful is to run into MESA graduates who were not my own students, or to talk about MESA and have a parent say, "Oh MESA it's just so wonderful," you know. And they'll give me the whole story of their child or children who've gone through MESA. It's wonderful. I remember meeting a woman in Los Angeles once. I knew her daughter for some other reason, and then I mentioned MESA. And then all of a sudden, she told me that she was a working mom, and MESA had saved, she felt, the lives of her sons, her two boys, because as a result of MESA she never had to worry about them. They both became engineers, and she said she doesn't know what would have happened to them without MESA. I ran into a woman who ran her own media company in San Francisco, who had worked for Hewlett-Packard and then started her own business. I was at a social event, and we were talking. I found out she was an engineer, and I told her about MESA, she said, "Oh, I'm a MESA graduate." [laughs] It was just terrific.

02:09:16

Wilmot: Did MESA's philosophy change from those early years to the way it operates currently—its philosophy now?

02:09:29

Smith: The basic core of the program has not changed in a sense in that its focus is on math- and science-based careers. It no longer can advocate for its target group because of Prop. 209, at least in California. Other states, however, can and do continue to use the target group that we originally started. The program components of study groups, college advising, the academic excellence in chemistry, physics, in math-related subjects both in high school and in college, and now in middle school and some elementary schools. The focus is still math and science.

I think they're able, because it's so big and because they've spread so far and money is shorter, and they're paying teachers—they have done away with the incentive awards, the cash awards. Students get a lot of—memorabilia, let's say. They get stuff. Some of it donated by companies. Maybe they get calculators or backpacks or sweatshirts. Some of the kids raise—once you have a group of MESA students, they become such a cohesive group in a school that they basically decide what they want to do. They may want to raise money so that all the MESA students can have, you know, certain kinds of jackets, or can go on some kind of field trip. They'll get out and just do it. It's wonderful to hear about. The parent component is still there, and it's gotten larger. They now have statewide meetings of parents, conferences for parents, northern and southern workshops for parents. The core of the program is basically the same.

I think that sometimes, the oversight is such that in certain areas of the state, the program is allowed to flounder because of a poor director, allowed to flounder too long. And right now, the MESA in the East Bay is almost nonexistent, even though this is where it started. Because statewide allowed the director of Berkeley—for the Bay Area—to sit there and do a poor job for five years. So I don't think there's a MESA program in any of the Oakland High Schools or San Francisco. I'm pretty sure there isn't—or Berkeley. And I just got a call from a parent last week asking how they could start a MESA program at Skyline. And that's just too sad, when they had one for years. In Sacramento, the school district gives the MESA program $350,000 a year as a sort of matching funds to help pay for field trips and things and to provide resources. It depends a lot from place to place. The core is still there, except the target group isn't there in California. But if the districts give matching funds, they could basically—what they're doing is paying for students who are not target students to receive the services. And I must say at this point that Professor Somerton always said MESA is a pilot program. It's the kind of thing that all of the schools should be doing for all of the students. He wanted to live to see the day there would be no need for a MESA student targeting certain students because all of the students would be getting this type of support for professions that they were interested in or career goals.

02:15:04

Wilmot: You currently serve on MESA's board of directors as an ex-officio member. I wanted to ask you, what does that entail?

02:15:16

Smith: It entails, actually, being a full participating board member. Probably a thorn in the side of the statewide office, since I'm one of the few people left who really understands, has been through the whole process through running the statewide program and being a teacher, and therefore I can easily spot when they're fooling. And I speak up.

02:15:54

Wilmot: You say, "Stop fooling?"

02:15:56

Smith: When they're not fooling, I also tell them they're wonderful. And always, I'm so proud to hear what the teachers are doing, and the good director is doing. I attend the statewide meetings of MESA advisors.

And Bob Finnell, the very first year, 1977-'78, said, "All these teachers have worked so hard, and they're all volunteers. We give the students incentive awards; we should do something for the teachers. Why don't we invite them all up to Berkeley for the weekend and have workshops for them?" And we did that, paid all their expenses. Usually when a teacher goes to a workshop, they have to pay their transportation, they have to pay a fee. So, the idea Bob Finnell said is that at the end of the year, we'll have a workshop for the teachers, and we'll bring in experts from Berkeley. One of the persons we brought in to talk to the teachers about what was going on in tutoring and study groups was Uri Treisman, who started the PDPpProgram. He didn't start it, but he got his PhD doing research that led to his getting a MacArthur Genius Award. A lot of the students from MESA participated in the PDP program. We always took our best and brightest and told them to go to PDP in the summertime instead of the MESA summer programs.

02:17:53

Wilmot: What does PDP stand for?

02:17:55

Smith: Professional Development Program. In order to participate in it, it was like advanced placement. It was a summer program—the whole summer, maybe six weeks. Students tested to get into it, so they only take you if you were in the top percent of the test population. So if we had students at that level, we would say put them in Uri Triesman's program. Then he developed study groups, which is the model that they used for his research, became the model still used today by the MESA program at the university level in engineering. Did that answer your question? [laughs]

02:18:56

Wilmot: Yes, it did. [laughs]

02:18:57

Smith: I can't remember what the question was. [laughs]

02:18:59

Wilmot: I know. My question had been, "What does it entail to serve on the board of MESA as an ex-officio member?" And you kind of went there.

02:19:11

Smith: I chair a subcommittee—the education subcommittee. I participate in the board meetings.

02:19:21

Wilmot: Great. Also, I wanted to ask you, what do you think of the direction that MESA has gone?

02:19:29

Smith: The thing that's wonderful about MESA is that regardless of what happens at the management level, either at the statewide office or the center office, the teachers who run the program directly at schools have never failed, almost never failed. Once they get a program in the school, they don't want to let it go. And that's where, as they say, the rubber hits the road. It's right there, and that's where MESA worked and still works. When I went to the MESA advisors conference this year in August, I talked to a teacher who told me that the university that his program was connected with was going to shut down all the MESA programs. They were pulling out. And he actually wrote to the state superintendent of schools, the chancellor of the university—they got MESA back. That's the commitment of the teachers.

02:21:08

Wilmot: I have a few more questions for you. I wanted to ask you, in 1977 after MESA expanded the financial assistance of the Hewlett Foundation and the Carnegie Mellon Foundation, clearly from then, there's been a snowball effect and there's been state funding. I wondered, as the funding pool became more diverse and more tied to state funding, how has that impacted the way that the original vision of MESA is transmitted?

02:22:02

Smith: The funding has not affected the vision of MESA, because the people who funded and still fund MESA, fund the vision. I mean, industry is more gung-ho on underrepresented minorities in the program. Even the state legislature would prefer it. [laughs] But right after MESA expanded, by that time, we were getting corporate money. And Bob Finnell, with all of his knowledge about corporations and contacts with CEOs, was able to bring in more corporate money—actually set up an industry advisory board, and the people who sat on the board were invited to join that board by Mr. Bechtel himself. That's the type of thinking that Bob Finnell had, that nobody's had since then. He talked to, first of all, Mr. Hewlett. Mr. Hewlett introduces him to Bechtel. Mr. Hewlett appoints a senior executive from Hewlett-Packard to sit on the advisory board, so Bechtel appoints a senior advisor. ARCO appointed a senior vice president, who then became CEO of ARCO, and was just the most absolutely wonderful guy. Those people attended the board meetings, talked about MESA, gave money to MESA, put their resources behind MESA.

In addition to having a top official on the industry advisory board, they also appointed a lower-level person within their companies, who worked directly with our centers. For example, ARCO is in southern California, in Los Angeles, so even though the senior vice president sat on the industry advisory board, one of his assistants actually was a person that our center directors could call up and say, "I need a field trip, or I need something." And get a response. That was true of TRW, PG&E; Pac Bell, from the very beginning, had a man who then wrote a MESA plan for Pac Bell for the entire

state. Everywhere there was a Pac Bell office, there was a Pac Bell person who worked with the MESA centers directly. They had an outline of what their staff persons were to do and how they were to work with the center. And that plan was terrific, may still be in effect. They gave separate money, besides what they gave to statewide level, they gave separate money to each of the centers for specific kinds of things.

02:26:00

Wilmot: How have the MESA funding sources—how would you say that the makeup of MESA's income now has changed?

02:26:11

Smith: Well, I think because we have so much state money, that the proportion of state money to private money–there's a greater disparity. Originally, it was like two-to-one. Now, it's much greater. We still have much more money than we used to have from corporate funds.

02:26:37

Wilmot: You mentioned Proposition 209 briefly, earlier in our interview. And I just wanted to ask you, given what you just told me about how the income pool is composed—how has 209 impacted the work that MESA does?

02:27:04

Smith: It hasn't impacted the work. It has impacted the students who participate in the program. When 209 came in, which said you had to take everybody on the basis of income, something that MESA has never supported, because within the black community, it's not income. It's both the middle-class and upper-middle-class black students are at equal risk with the poor kids when it comes to academic achievement because of the institution that they attend, that don't believe that they can achieve high levels of academic achievement in math and science. So I don't care if your parent is a doctor or lawyer or a multi-millionaire. If you're black, and you go to school, if you go to a private school or a public school, you're not going to have the same level of belief in your ability that a white student or an Asian student will get. By the time you keep fighting that battle over and over, a lot of the black kids give up. Unless their parents—even with their parents there all the time, you got to have somebody within the system, like a teacher, who can push you and help you achieve.

So when 209 came in and they had to redefine the MESA target group to make it economically disadvantaged, then that left too much leeway for the center directors who never supported our target group in the first place, or the persons who were selecting the students. That left them too much leeway to just let anybody in that they wanted to, instead of still focusing on the ones who most needed the help, which are still—whether it's economic or whatever you want to call it. Educationally disadvantaged, economically disadvantaged. The MESA original target group is still the most disadvantaged.

[Minidisc 3]

01-00:00:09

Smith: Prop. 209 made us redefine our target group. We had to use the definition of the University of California for students to target for outreach, which is basically what MESA is now: an outreach program of the university. And that means that it had to be

based on educationally and economically disadvantaged. But my point is that if you're in a school which is 90 percent Hispanic, let's say, it's certainly easy to select students at that school who fit the original MESA target group. But if you go to a school, and call it a MESA school, and it's 90 percent white, then you're going to have a problem. So MESA should, it could, very easily continue to serve the original target group by simply selecting schools in which it works. And within those schools, work with the students who are defined as economically disadvantaged.

My point is basically that if you take educationally disadvantaged, and it can't be based on the fact as it is now, that if your parent went to college, then you cannot be considered to be educationally disadvantaged. My point is that if your parents went to college, and you're black, you're still educationally disadvantaged, because so many black college graduates never ever, first of all, achieved their economic or professional goals because of discrimination. And secondly, a high percentage of the black college graduates come from the South, from black schools, many of which are under-resourced. They don't have the resources of the major universities, nor the competition.

00:03:18

It's still possible for us to focus on our target group, it's still possible, under Prop. 209, to focus on our original target group when you consider that whatever definition of disadvantaged—educationally or economically—will fit into the lowest quartile. Therefore, if we are really targeting our resources where they will do the most good, it's still possible to serve MESA's original target group. But it takes a commitment of every person in the staff, all the way down to every center and every school, and that's not feasible. But to the extent that it is, the statewide office, in my mind, and what I'm always crabbing about at the meetings is that they should, because it just takes proper training, proper definition.

MESA cannot solve all the problems of the public schools. MESA is a targeted program. It does not deal with 90 percent of the students. It doesn't deal with 97 percent of the students. There are only about, in any population, about 3 percent of the students who are interested in careers that are math-based. If you talk about engineers and scientists, you can expand that now, if you look at the new MESA magazine. They've expanded into a special program on business and now a special program on nursing, which I find unnecessary at the secondary school level because basically, everybody goes into business or nursing. They should all take chemistry in high school—chemistry, physics, and four years in math, four years of English, and four years of science. Because what if you spend all this time focusing somebody on nursing, and they get to college, and they suddenly decide they want to be a doctor? You've sold them short if you don't give the same background as the student who wants to get an MBA or be an engineer. An engineer is just an AB degree, you know.

00:06:07

Wilmot: So you feel as if those kinds of programs, in some ways, are shifting MESA's focus to vocational—

Smith: Yes.

00:06:20

Wilmot: —as opposed to higher education.

00:06:23

Smith: Well, MESA started out focusing on—. Some people don't consider engineering—they say it's not research-level professionalism. But if you talk about careers in math-based fields, you will already include business, you already include nursing, and medicine. You don't need to set up special programs. Besides, the nursing profession and the medical profession have already set up their own programs. One thing that MESA had never done before was to try to step into other people's niches. For example, if I had a student in MESA that I knew was interested in, let's say, medicine, then I could refer them to other ongoing programs where they could get in touch with doctors or get practical experience. Their summer jobs could relate to that. But when it came to their academic work in school, they still should take the four years of math, the four years of science, and the four years of English. So I didn't need anything special, except maybe a field trip. Send them off to the hospital on a special field trip. It's attention to what the student is interested in.

Same thing is true in business. Some of my students who were in MESA decided to major in accounting, and they're CPAs. But they still took the same basic courses in MESA. Some of the MESA graduates I taught are doctors now. But they still went on the same field trips with us. They decided they weren't interested in engineering. You go in a field trip, they said, "We want a field trip to a hospital." So we went to the University of California Med. School. That was just one of our field trips. The ones who are interested in medicine were very interested in that. The ones who are interested in engineering, maybe, found the connection. I know an engineer who works for Kaiser Hospital. I didn't realize they hired engineers.

00:09:01

Wilmot: I have one last question for today, which is about the Port of Oakland, and wondering if the Port of Oakland participated as a mentor or one of the sponsors of the program.

Smith: Not really.

Wilmot: Okay.

00:09:20

Smith: They were never as big as the navy. [laughs] They would have worked with the Oakland public schools, and at that time that MESA started, they weren't interested in hiring any professional blacks. So, a lot of this came about later.

00:10:01

Wilmot: Okay. Let's close for today.

01-00:10:02

Smith: Thank you.

INTERVIEW 3: NOVEMBER 15, 2002
[Resume Minidisc 3]

00:10:02
Wilmot: November 15, interview three, Mary Perry Smith.

On Wednesday when we closed, we were talking a little bit about MESA recruitment targets and how they were changed or not by the passing of Proposition 209. There's so many places to go today, so I'm trying to figure out which one to go first. I'm still very interested in the development of MESA in the 1970s as it expanded and gained its industry advisory board. It was a really important decade. It kind of just took off like a shooting star, and I wanted to ask you. I guess I would start first around MESA's fund-raising strategy. In 1977, you had all foundation money and some corporate donations, as I understand it.

00:11:44
Smith: Right—not a lot of corporate money at that time because that was when we first got started as a statewide program.

00:12:01
Wilmot: In 1978, that was when representatives from MESA went before the California Assembly and won $250,000.

00:12:17
Smith: Was that '78?

00:12:19
Wilmot: It was '78-'79. It was that year from the budget. I got this from your book.

00:12:25
Smith: Right, I know [laughs].

00:12:28
Wilmot: But I wanted to ask you, it said in the book that you testified in front of the assembly.

00:12:36
Smith: Well, I went with Bob Finnell, and I sat with him when he made the presentation to the Ways and Means Committee. But as I recall, I was only introduced, I did not have to say anything. He just talked about the program as it had run under my leadership at Oakland Tech and how we have expanded and our success. So I was kind of the invisible testimony to the program. But Bob did all of the talking, thank goodness.

00:13:14
Wilmot: Do you remember that being kind of a challenging environment? Were people receptive to MESA?

00:13:23
Smith: Oh, very, because [Assemblyman John] Vasconcellos was the chair of the committee, and he's a very liberal guy. He's a very touchy-feely guy. He's into holistic things and natural environments. Helping everybody he possibly can, you know, and education was very high on his agenda. He truly understood the importance of education and the importance of bringing everybody along. Our program was so simple and made so

much sense and was so easy to sell, and Bob was just a wonderful spokesperson for the program. He had a good subject, and he used it well. So it was very easy. Bob had the advantage, I don't know whether I mentioned this, of being bilingual. So he was able to kind of mix back and forth among the legislators who were of Spanish descent and also the white, black, legislators. And since our target group at that time was black students and Mexican American students and American Indians, he was very comfortable in telling our story to this group of legislators. And, you know, some people don't move back and forth between cultures very well. Bob was very adept at this. He did a good job, as you can tell.

00:15:44

Wilmot: Excuse me for one second. [pause]

Did receiving that first allotment of money, which very soon grew to a million dollars within very few years from the state, did that change the way the program was administered or delivered? I asked you this question in some ways two days ago, but I'm asking it again.

00:16:15

Smith: Well, not at first, not when we got the original grants. It basically, simply allowed us to more adequately fund the centers we had and to expand to other places. We always felt that we should not overextend the program beyond our ability to deliver what we said we could deliver, particularly in terms of funding. So we were very careful about expanding the program and selecting areas where we felt we'd get, as one of our board members from Bechtel loved to say, the greatest bang for the buck. But it was more than that. It's just where you could be most effective and reach the largest target group, and also where people really wanted the program and were willing to go out and put in the time to make it work well. The commitment of the schools, the teachers in the school, or the superintendent, or the university. Because originally, we were only in eight universities. I think we're in sixteen now. We have sixteen centers. We're in, I think, all of the campuses of UC and almost all of the campuses of the California State University, and now have expanded into the community colleges, so we probably have more centers than that. But at that time, it really allowed us to do a better job of funding the centers. We had a waiting list at that time, so it made it possible for us to open up new centers. [pause] I think we have probably around twenty-one thousand students that we serve around the state from elementary school through college, engineering only at the university level right now.

00:19:17

Wilmot: Yeah. It looks like, from your latest newsletter, it looks like it says twenty-four thousand.

00:19:24

Smith: Twenty-four, so it's gone up.

00:19:26

Wilmot: Yeah. I wanted to turn now to talk a little bit about your industry board, which was something that you touched on Wednesday. I'm wondering if you could just kind of tell the story of how it formed. What year it formed, and then I have some follow-up questions about that.

01-00:19:49
Smith: I think I went over that on the last tape.

01-00:19:53
Wilmot: You did.

01-00:19:55
Smith: I think it was probably 1978, shortly after we started, so it was probably about 1979 that it was in full swing. Basically, once we set up the MESA statewide board, and we had representatives from industry on the board. The president of the board at that time was from Caltech, I think. But one of the persons on the board was from Bechtel. Bob and he and Bill Somerton decided that they could get more support from industry by getting the industries more closely allied with MESA. They would have a better understanding that in many ways what we were doing by training more scientists and engineers was providing quality employees for the California industries. Bob had worked at the national level and on the national level. I think probably NACME's entire board was composed of CEOs of major corporations around the country. So he brought this concept to MESA.

The representative from Bechtel decided to ask Mr. Bechtel himself to help form the industry board. And so, Bob Finnell and Bill Somerton met with Mr. Bechtel and asked him if he would sign a letter inviting the CEOs of major corporations in California. That included Hughes, at that time, Lockhead, TRW, ARCO, Chevron, IBM, HP, and of course, Bill Hewlett was the other signatory to the letter. And basically, they asked their peers if they would assign one of their senior executives to serve on an industry advisory board for MESA. And at the meetings of the industry advisory board, we as staff would make presentations on the progress of the program, and we would do show-and-tell. That is, we would bring in a MESA advisor or MESA students or a MESA principal. At each meeting, there would be not only a report on where we were financially, in terms of program, how things were going in the centers, what centers were involved, but also we would bring in actual persons involved in the program.

The industry people, of course, were extremely impressed with what we were doing. Every year, they would pledge money in support of the program. So that was one way we got substantial support from industry. And because they were active themselves, they just wrote MESA into their budget every year. It was just that way. That was one of the untouchables—unless an industry really got into super financial trouble, MESA was a line item, just standard in their budget, and for some of them, it still is. However, since these top executives could not attend a lot of meetings, then we set up not only the industry advisory board, but later on around 1982 or '81, we set up another board which had a name like Industry Technical Board, or something of this sort. Each of the industries that had a representative on the industry advisory board had one of their assistants that sat on this board, and this board was the actual working board in the sense that these were the people who worked directly with our directors in each of their areas.

I guess I had mentioned Pacific Bell, which was an excellent example. Their representative on the MESA industry advisory board was so impressed with what MESA was doing that he went off and wrote his own proposal or program for the entire Pac Bell staff throughout the state. They had guidelines on how they were to work with

the MESA centers in their particular districts, and they had training sessions on MESA, what it was about. They had their own funding for their work with the center, and each one of them had a budget separate from what they gave at the statewide level. They had smaller budgets that they could use for field trips or lunch or other equipment or awards that Pac Bell in each of the areas wanted to fund. That was up to that local person in that district.

Out of the industry advisory board not only came this statewide board of actual working representatives of industry, but we asked that each of the centers also have an advisory board. So each of the centers throughout the state has an advisory board which has representatives of the university where they're located, and industry people they work with, and teachers and parents in that area. This involvement of the community at every level came all the way down to the centers. Eventually, at the school level today, there are parent advisory committees, not necessarily always at the center level, but at each school in some of the centers. And then representatives from the parents advisory group at a school will meet in a center meeting periodically. So, this concept of involving the community, the industries in the area, started almost from the very beginning of MESA. The industry advisory board was extremely helpful.

01-00:28:31

Wilmot: Was Caltrans a big player on the industry advisory board when you were involved with MESA?

01-00:28:41

Smith: No. Caltrans actually became a major player with MESA, and even now a Caltrans representative is not on the statewide board, which is an interesting thing, but Caltrans became active with MESA after I left. A lot of the involvement of Caltrans came through the Sacramento center because our Sacramento MESA center is in the state capitol. They have a wonderful MESA director there who's very politically savvy. So, he has made an effort to inform everybody he possibly can in Sacramento about the good things that MESA is doing and what the program's about. But one of the areas in which he worked, one of the places he went was to Caltrans. He talked to them about the MESA students, and Caltrans just jumped on the bandwagon and set up something similar to co-op programs, where students could be hired to work at Caltrans during the summer. They help with summer programs, and they have contributed a lot to the hands-on experience and training of the MESA students.

This is very similar to the program I talked about that was set up by the Alameda Naval Air Station. So Caltrans was able to provide that. It's quite interesting, the Forest Service has also come to MESA and said, "This is a wonderful program, and we need more of the underrepresented minorities working in this area." They also tried to set up a relationship with MESA to get more of our students looking at that field. We've had inquiries from business, the business school at UC, and I noticed in the newsletter now that MESA's gotten a grant to help with the nursing program. [laughs]

01-00:31:31

Wilmot: We talked about that.

01-00:31:33

Smith: I'm not sure where that's going, but it's interesting, because from the very beginning, when people found that MESA was such a good program, then they said, "Oh, this is our way to help what we're doing." And they would come to MESA and say, "We want you to partner with us to get more of these students." The way you handle it is not always to say, "Yes." But another way of handling it is through field trips and speakers. But it should not change the basic program at the secondary level.

The idea of MESA is that in the secondary schools, the students take the highest level of math, science, and English they possibly can. And we have them do as well as they possibly can in those subjects, so that when they get to the university level, they can go into any major they want to. They can go into nursing, they can go into business, they can go into medicine, they can go into engineering, they can become a physicist or mathematician. They are not limited. Because the one thing we found out, and the reason why the program started, is that most of the underrepresented minority students who had talents in and were interested in these fields never got the proper background in high school to study in them. So when they got to college as freshmen, they failed in what they really wanted to do, so they switched over to other subjects.

Now, it really wouldn't matter if 50 percent of the MESA graduates still went into the social fields, social studies fields, social service fields, teaching, which traditionally have been open. It wouldn't matter to the fact that MESA gave them the best possible background, and they found out by being a MESA student that they really were not that interested in being a biologist or a chemist or an engineer or getting an MBA. If you learn that before you get to college, then you don't waste your time.

And this is one of the important things that MESA does, so that originally our idea, handling all these inquiries that came in from other fields, wanted MESA to expand into a business program and expand into a forestry program, was that we don't have to change basically what we're doing. Except that you have the opportunity to come in and make presentations to our students on what you do and what the opportunities are in your field. You might light a fire under some student who really, really likes what you're doing. We don't need to set up a special program on nursing or medicine because, as I mentioned before, we took one field trip, because if you ask the students, "Where would you like to go? What is it you would like to see this year in a field trip?" So you look at the list, and three or four of them want to go to hospitals or medical schools and see what goes on there. A field trip there opens up an entirely new vista to a lot of students who go on the tour who may see: "Well, this is something I really like. And I can see an opportunity here where I can use my talents." It isn't necessarily being a doctor, because you find out there are a lot of other things going on in a hospital or in the field of medicine.

We actually told our students that if you get an AB degree in physics or chemistry or engineering, you're way ahead of the average applicant for medical school, because the average applicant for medical school takes biology, physiology, and pre-med majors. The fact that you have a degree in one of these other fields shows that you have a broader background, and you've really taken some of the tough subjects. The medical schools, the law schools, the business schools respect that background. Also, there are opportunities in business, there are opportunities in law, for people who have backgrounds in science and math. So this was the message that we gave all of our

students, and today some of the MESA students are doctors, some are lawyers, some are engineers, and accountants.

The message of MESA, which I fear is getting lost at this level because of all this expansion, is basically—I think it's getting lost, not at the teacher level, but sometimes at the director and statewide level—that the focus of MESA is high academic achievement at the secondary school level for our kids in as difficult subjects as possible in math, science, and English. If they could take all honors courses all the way through, it would be wonderful. This is what MESA is working for, so that when they get to college, they can compete. This is our basic philosophy.

01-00:38:39

Wilmot: You just spoke to one of the major—the next question I was going to ask you was—you're credited with creating the standards for students that MESA adheres to, to this day, in this book. I was going to ask you about your philosophy about high standards, and unless you want to say anything else, I'm going to consider that question answered.

01-00:39:11

Smith: Well, I would like to say a little more about that, because so many of the programs that had come out of the university before MESA, and we've seen almost all of those changes, all those programs changed to the MESA attitude. Almost all of the previous programs have been a two-week orientation to college with: "This is what you have to take, and this is your plan. Go follow it." And orientation for parents. But what MESA does, which is different from the other programs, is to say, "This is what it takes to get where you want to go, where you said you want to go, because we asked first of all. We're not here to recruit engineers or doctors, we're here to say, 'What are you interested in?' And if this is what interests you and you sign on, then these are the standards we expect of you. But we're not just saying, 'Do it.' We're saying, 'We're there to help you every day.'" That's the difference.

MESA has a teacher at every school who is a math or science person who's there to help a student when they get stuck. You have a physics test today, this afternoon, and you have something that you still don't understand. You need somebody right away. You can't wait for a tutor next week. And if you're in a school where you have a MESA advisor, you can go to that MESA advisor and say, "Look, I need help right away with this." And the teacher can either help them or get somebody to help them right away. Whereas most programs are centered at the university, and when a student needs help, they have to call the university or headquarters and wait for them to find somebody to come out and help them, if they do at all—if they have a helping program at all.

So the standards that we set, we tell them the standards are high. This is what we want you to do. But we're going to be here every day to help you, and we're going to help you understand why you do it with our field trips and speakers. We're going to help you apply for college, and we're going to help you with study techniques and study sessions. But this is what you have to do, and if this is not for you, that's fine. It's not that you're a straight-A student; you don't have to be a straight-A student. You just have to get in there and work. The fact that you graduate with a C+ average or a B- average, having taken calculus or pre-calculus and trig and chemistry and physics, means you're still going to be capable of completing a degree, if you want to, at a state university. Not everybody needs to go to the UC Berkeley campuses or to Cal or to

UCLA or to Stanford. And that's not our job, to supply Berkeley and UCLA and Stanford. If some of our students go there—fine. It's important that MESA always maintain that level of excellence in terms of the standards that they require of their students, or else there's no reason for the program.

01-00:43:19
Wilmot: You mentioned UC Berkeley, and I wanted to go there and talk about Berkeley's MESA program. How has UC Berkeley contributed to MESA over the years? And I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to—the first thing I want to get at is the impact of MESA's efforts at Berkeley, in terms of bringing more math, science students of color, or from MESA's target population, into UC Berkeley. I understood that you just expressly said that's not our job.

01-00:44:06
Smith: Well, our job is not specifically to supply UC Berkeley, but a high percentage of our students have gone to UC Berkeley and have graduated. I don't know what the current numbers are, but I know several of the students who were in the original MESA program between 1970 and 1977 are graduates of UC Berkeley in engineering or biology or other fields. The UC Berkeley, of course, was the "mother ship" originally, of MESA, because that's where the program started. It had just an outstanding program, outstanding director. They started the concept of the study groups, which are used by the MESA engineering programs at the university level by implementing Uri Triesman's study group techniques. Working with Uri—we actually hired Uri to go around the state and train our center directors and staff on the study techniques that he used in his groups. So UC Berkeley started that, and they started the parent conferences. They worked with all of the high schools in Oakland. They worked with Emeryville, Richmond, Berkeley High. It was the best program we had in the state, and now, I must say, that almost doesn't exist.

01-00:46:23
Wilmot: Around what year did it begin to fall off?

01-00:46:26
Smith: Around the year the current state director came in. I don't know what happened, but there was not the oversight on the Berkeley program. It was allowed over a period of five years to deteriorate. The director there was allowed to get his PhD while he was running MESA. He didn't run MESA, and it's infuriating to me.

01-00:47:04
Wilmot: Is he still there?

01-00:47:04
Smith: No. They finally got rid of him, but they should have gotten rid of him after one year. Or after things began to deteriorate, but they didn't. Now UC Berkeley is starting from scratch, and they've hired a new director who is struggling to start from scratch and start a program. It's truly disappointing, because that means that all of the MESA advisors, all of the foundation work that was in all of those schools over many years is lost. If they go in to Oakland Tech today, they would have to find the teacher and train a teacher to be a MESA advisor. There is no program there. I got a call from somebody last week asking me how they could start a MESA program at Skyline. One of the

parents really wants to. So that's why I'm on the statewide board, that's why I go to meetings. I raise these questions at every board meeting. And I continue to raise them.

01-00:48:30

Wilmot: Do you mean raising the questions of one, what's going on with UC Berkeley MESA, and two, the vocational add-ons such as nursing and forestry and what's the thinking that MESA is pursuing? Are there other questions that you raise every meeting?

01-00:48:47

Smith: All of them—well, not every meeting because this is new. It didn't even come through the statewide advisory board. There's not a sense of how to run or interact with the statewide board. If you have an advisory board, and you want to keep good people on it, and we still have representatives from HP and Chevron and Pac Bell and Southern Bell who come to meetings and sit there. They're not asked to advise on whether or not we should go into nursing and where the funding is for that and how it's going to be implemented. This is what you have an advisory board for. The board isn't making policy, but they are the people who are actually working in the areas that we want our students to be hired in. So, why not ask them? So I'm really, really, at this point, very disappointed in the leadership of MESA.

And MESA is now under the Office of the President. And so it's down several layers. We have the president of the university, the associate president, the vice president, then the MESA director.

01-00:50:39

Wilmot: I want to go back to Berkeley and then pick up this thread that you introduced. I'm wondering if Berkeley's commitment to MESA has changed with different administrations. In 1971 was Chancellor Bowker, and then, I believe it was Heyman. You also had a strong relationship with Heyns and Seaborg, I think.

01-00:51:31

Smith: Well, Seaborg at that time was at the Lawrence Hall of Science. We used Seaborg as an inspiration. For example, when we brought—this is how Bob Finnell and Bill Somerton worked. When we brought all of the heads of schools of engineering around the state, invited them to the Lawrence Hall of Science to introduce MESA to them and to ask them if they're interested to do an RFP, whatever, a proposal, we brought Seaborg in—he's right across the hall—and had him talk about the importance of MESA, because he knew about it from the Berkeley experience.

When the industry advisory board found out we were having a meeting at the San Francisco Airport Hilton or something, and they found out Jerry Brown, who was governor at that time, was going to be addressing another group in the same building, they jumped on the task of getting Jerry Brown to just stop by. The way they lured him to come by and spend fifteen or twenty minutes with the industry advisory board was to let him know that he would be addressing senior vice presidents of Chevron and ARCO and HP and TRW and all these other companies and have a chance to talk with Glenn Seaborg, who Bob Finnell arranged to be there. He got Governor Brown there. Glenn Seaborg is just a great guy. You could just walk up to him, shake his hand and say hi, talk to him. He remembered your name if you saw him just several times.

01-00:54:00

Wilmot: Could you kind of just describe the history of Berkeley's administration, their levels of commitment to MESA? What did that look like? And to MESA students once they matriculated?

01-00:54:20

Smith: Well, once a student's matriculated, they were just there. When the Professional Development Program started, then we saw to it that every one of our students signed up and participated in that, because there was no MESA program for the students once they got to Berkeley, once they got to college. So they really had to struggle. But already, they were different from other underrepresented minority students, because they knew how to study, they know how to ask questions of their professors, and they were not ashamed to ask questions or go to tutoring sessions.

Whereas what Uri Treisman found out, and which we all knew as teachers, is that most of the underrepresented minority students have this feeling of asking questions and appearing stupid. Having their peers laugh at them if they ask a question in class which appears stupid. They don't want to ask a question because sometime in their background, they asked a question and they got ridiculed either by the teacher or the students. You have to help students understand that they have to get over that. They have to ask questions. When the professor has office hours, they've got to sign up and get in there. Because one of the things you need to know is that if the professor knows you, then you get a little more leeway on grading than if you're just a name in the class. If you make yourself known, and you're interested.

Most of the underrepresented minority students studied. They would go to class, listen to the professor, go home and study. But they'd study by themselves, and then they'd come back. Whereas they find out the Asian students wouldn't necessarily go to class to hear what the teacher said, they went to class to find out from the professor what it took to get an "A." Then they would go off and study in study groups. And everybody in the group would go over what is needed to get an "A." They would work with somebody who passed the class the year before. So this is the technique that Uri introduced to the black and Mexican American, American Indian students that made it possible for them to achieve at the same level as the Asian students, who were out-achieving the white students. So it was this concept, that you don't study math and science off in a corner by yourself. That it's a language, and you talk to each other. This is something we teach students early on in MESA, which makes them more competitive students, you see.

The students who were MESA students then became known to their professors. The university presidents, the university chancellors were always apprised of MESA by Bob Finnell and Bill Somerton and what their achievements were. They were always invited to some of the activities that we did. The dean of the School of Engineering, Professor Pister, was the next-door neighbor of Bill Somerton and knew about MESA from the time it started and saw to it, as dean of the school of engineering, that MESA got everything they needed at the university. He was very supportive. We didn't get money from any of the administration, but we did get support from the College of Engineering because that's where the MESA office was, and then eventually, MESA expanded into MESA university program, where the techniques of study and summer jobs and scholarship programs expanded to include university engineering students.

01-00:59:41
Wilmot: When did that happen?

01-00:59:42
Smith: That happened—that was part of the money we got from the state legislature. Later on, the idea that you don't get money—new money—just to do what you're doing. So when you go to the state legislature or foundations, which is always the case, if they're going to give you money, it is just to expand. So you have to be careful sometimes, you don't want them to know what you're doing. The expansion could be a problem. There was already a model for the MESA university program that was running at Cal State Northridge, that had been started by Ray Landis. It's not easy to set up a program at the university level with all of your prima donna professors, which actually does outreach to minority students in a field like science and engineering. But he did it at Northridge and set up a section of the engineering building where they had a room. Students could come in and crash night or day and study together. He did orientation sessions to the university. He did orientations of his colleagues in the department of engineering on working with minority students because, you know, one of the most devastating things is for a black student, particularly a black male, or used to be any female, to walk in to a physics or engineering class and have the professor look around the class and say, "Are you in the right class?" And that's what they do. And so he did that, so eventually that became the model for the university MESA program.

The state legislature gave money for that program, so it was about 1981, '82 that the university program started around the state. They set up offices with a person to service the MESA students who enrolled in engineering. The MESA program at the university level, in terms of support services, is only for students who enroll in engineering. It is not like the MESA program in the pre-college program, which services all the students who are interested in math- and science-based fields. And thank goodness when the community college program was set up, that they set it up so it handles like the pre-college program, helping students with their basic chemistry, physics, math. The first two years of college, without focusing on any particular science.

01-01:03:26
Wilmot: One part of the reason that I asked that question was reading about Heyns's involvement in creating your industry. He seemed to be one of the people who really outreached.

01-01:03:40
Smith: He helped to sign the letter.

01-01:03:44
Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:03:47
Smith: Yeah. Because, you see, part of the problem was to have a letter which really showed the prestigious nature of support that the program had. So yes, but that was about his only involvement. He did come to one of our awards programs for teachers.

01-01:04:19
Wilmot: And under Chancellor Heyman?

01-01:04:23

Smith: Heyman was always supportive. His vice chancellor was Professor Laetsch. He was the head of the Lawrence Hall of Science when we first went there. So he's the one who set up the statewide headquarters of the Lawrence Hall of Science. He always felt MESA was part of his thing, too. He was also very supportive. And then Tien—it was very interesting to me in going back through some of the stuff that I looked at once when I was writing the book with Bob and Bill to find that Professor Somerton, when MESA first started in 1970, had written a letter to each of his colleagues in engineering, asking if they would be willing to provide assistance to students who needed advising or tutoring or would like to visit the university. Tien signed one of those. I thought that was interesting. His came right back. Signed it, sure, he'd be interested. So when he became chancellor, he was well acquainted with MESA and very supportive.

01-01:06:11

Wilmot: He has a reputation for being someone who was very supportive of minority students. Were there other key people who were part of UC Berkeley's faculty and staff who really stood by MESA?

01-01:06:30

Smith: George Maslach. Since he was the dean of the School of Engineering when MESA started, and Professor Somerton went to him first, Professor Maslach feels that he's the founder of MESA. He's always been supportive. I just saw him a couple of weeks ago, he and his wife, at an event. So he was always supportive. Of course, I've mentioned Professor Morrison and Blackwell and all of the black professors. Professor [William] Lester in chemistry.

01-01:07:30

Wilmot: And Bragg?

01-01:07:31

Smith: Oh, Bragg was particularly supportive because he became advisor to the black Science Students Association. And the MESA graduates who went to Berkeley all participated in that, and usually rotated presidency of the organization and were the leadership of that organization. There was a man who was the lab manager for, I think it was chemistry, the chemistry college. His name was Frank Irvin. And he was able to hire MESA students while they were there, to work in the labs. He was particularly helpful in helping them get jobs. Professor Lester, who was for a while head of the National Science Foundation, national chemistry program, some national program, the latest thing in chemistry that was set up by NSF. He was brought out to the Lawrence Berkeley Labs, and we had him speak as a speaker for our MESA advisors and directors at one of our early conferences in '79, when it was held at the International House. And he just blew everybody's mind because he was just so articulate and so smart and yet able to explain what he was doing.

01-01:09:39

Wilmot: When your husband, Dr. Norvel Smith, came on as an associate vice chancellor of student affairs at UC Berkeley from 1973 to 1982, were you able to work together to leverage some opportunities for MESA at Berkeley?

01-01:10:00

Smith: Well, mostly in terms of the students who were applying for admission from MESA and having the cooperation of the admission staff and the financial aid staff and college advisors for the MESA students, in terms of their applications. We got great support from the outreach section of Berkeley. He made sure that everybody knew about MESA's program, so that they would pay special attention to any applicant who said that they have participated in the MESA program. That was very important, and of course, that was a period of affirmative action, so that it was possible for a lot of our students who met all the requirements, but were not necessarily in the top quarter of applicants. You know, they weren't 4.0 students, but they met all the basic requirements for entrance.

As I had mentioned before, the requirements for entrance for admission to the University of California were not as high as the standards of MESA, so that the students had taken more difficult courses and more courses than the basic requirements for admission. They probably did not have outstanding SAT scores, competitive SAT scores and competitive GPAs as a result, because the whole history of underrepresented minority students in test-taking. The students always performed at a level of other students whose SAT scores were one hundred to two hundred points higher once they got to college—so that fact was given consideration.

The other problem was that often, when underrepresented minority students are admitted to the universities, and this is particularly true with the state universities, and they go through the outreach office. Under affirmative action, the outreach office requires the students to take dummy courses in math, like remedial math and remedial English, remedial science, their first year. They have sort of like "English A" at the university. If you don't pass an English test for Berkeley, you have to take English A. So we had to make sure that if they were MESA students that we had to let the university people know that our students were not to be shuttled off into those remedial courses. That even though their grade point averages may have been 3.0 or 3.2, whatever it was needed to get in, that they had the background to take the regular courses. So that was an advantage, my being able to call up or talk to people at the university in the outreach offices and the admissions. That was an advantage.

01-01:14:23

Wilmot: I have a question also, I know that Harry Morrison was active in the first advisory committee, the first committee that was formed. And Professor Bragg, as a faculty advisor to MESA. Were any of the other ones you mentioned very active in the advisory committee?

01-01:14:43

Smith: No.

01-01:14:44

Wilmot: Okay. And then the other question I have for you. Harry Morrison, as you know, he passed. What kind of person was he? He's someone we really wanted to interview, and we just didn't.

01-01:14:55

Smith: That's too bad.

01-01:14:55
Wilmot: Yeah.

01-01:14:57
Smith: Because he was brilliant, and I don't know anything about what he was doing in physics. As I said, it was so far out, in terms of the level at which he worked, that it would be not possible for him to explain it to me. He was a person who was, as we say, a very strong race man. We were very active together in a group that Norvel and Harry and a couple of other people formed where we would get together on a Sunday afternoon and talk about issues of race.

01-01:15:47
Wilmot: The Alain Locke?

01-01:15:51
Smith: The Alain Locke Society. It included art and science and politics. It was not just issues that dealt with day-to-day racism. We talked about what wonderful accomplishments we were making as individuals in our fields. So Harry would give a lecture on blacks in science. But Harry also loved music, he loved jazz, he loved movies, he loved art. He read everything, and he was a super conversationalist. And always, I'm sure he was wonderful with students because he had a great laugh. And every time you called him up, he was always just so upbeat and positive. Even though he went through a lot with his diabetes, but he was a wonderful person to work with. And we would send—when I would send MESA students to Berkeley, I would say, "Check in with Harry Morrison, check in with Professor Bragg, check in with Professor Blackwell," and later on, Professor Lester. Because by the time I left Berkeley, Professor Lester was still at the Lawrence Berkeley Lab. He was not full-time on campus, teaching chemistry.

01-01:17:43
Wilmot: It sounds like you created a network of people. I have a question for you.

01-01:17:56
Smith: Mm-hmm.

01-01:17:57
Wilmot: Do you consider yourself a race woman?

01-01:17:59
Smith: Oh, of course. When you think my grandparents were born in slavery, and that my father grew up in antebellum South and always talked to us about his life and what was going on, and his heroes, who were George Washington Carver and Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass. He—and we grew up under segregation, he'd been in the North. So, even in Indiana, as I mentioned before, we would live in places where the schools were segregated. But always, the hotels and restaurants were segregated. So, yes. I mean, you have to be. [laughs] You have to be—well, when you understand what is happening to black people in this country and the reasons for it. It's just too sad.

But you see, I'm not very good at being a spokesperson for the race, because of the way I look. People say, "What is that white woman talking about black people for?" You know, I've had that—yeah, you understand. I've had students I've taught for years, and

years later, they'll came up and say, "Mrs. Smith, are you—are you—?" And I say, "Black, yes." [laughs] You know, I know what they're going to say. It's very interesting. But you can't walk into a classroom and say, "Hello, my name is Mrs. Smith, and I'm black," you know? Most of my students never knew I was black until years later, or later on, after I taught them. That's the white students or the black students. Until MESA. But my MESA students always knew. So they would go around and tell people.

And secondly, the way I fight racism is through MESA, by trying to develop underrepresented students who are scholars. "You don't have to do a lot of talking," I tell them. "All you have to do is show what you can do. You don't have to get angry, just get better." And also through Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame, where you work with young people and people who are making films that talk about the accomplishments of the race, rather than what we're bombarded with daily, in terms of killings and robberies. You know, it's just too sad. So I don't choose to do things for which I'm not really suited by personality, either. My area is education, and that's where I work—education in the arts and education in science.

01-01:21:48
Wilmot: I wanted to return to something about the industry board. Were you working with them closely?

01-01:22:07
Smith: Yes, at that time, I was the only staff person. It was just Bob Finnell and Mary. Oh, and let's see. And then later on, we got an industry loan person who then worked with the national program.

01-01:22:32
Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:22:33
Smith: I'm sorry, who worked with the university MESA program, who set up the university MESA program. Was it Gene Houston? Yeah, it was Gene Houston.

01-01:22:55
Wilmot: When you worked with that board, was there ever a place or time where the visions didn't match? Where the MESA vision didn't match with the industry vision?

01-01:23:05
Smith: Originally, there was a program in San Francisco, which was something called a technical program. It was the typical program that was set up to move underrepresented minorities into math and science fields without any background. They got a lot of federal money. So what they would do is take people off the street who said they wanted to become engineers and high school seniors who said they wanted to be engineers who knew almost nothing about engineering, and had, some of them, not even passed algebra. Then they would enroll them in training programs and send them off to San Francisco State to study engineering. Then the typical professor would see these people of color in their classes, and know they would fail. And that's their attitude, and they did fail. But it wasn't the students' fault. It was the fault of the people who just took people and didn't realize that it takes calculus to study physics and engineering in college. They took people without providing them with the academic background they

needed and tried to train them as engineers. What it did was reinforce the stereotype that a lot of the industry people and university professors had in those fields, that people of color—blacks and Mexican Americans—could not learn those subjects.

We actually had a speaker from Kaiser Aluminum at one of our advisors' meetings in 1979. We had all the advisors up from the state, and we got this big top executive from Kaiser Industries to come talk to us. The gist of his speech was that, "You're doing good work, but it probably won't work." And, "We do have Asians working with us in Kaiser, but it's not in their nature to be managers. So you should never think that you can become a manager, that you can train these people to become managers." It was the most disgusting speech I ever heard. [laughs] But he was just expressing the attitude, didn't even—he wasn't trying to be mean or racist. That was just it. He was old. [laughter]

01-01:26:34
Wilmot: Mm-hmm, he was old.

01-01:26:35
Smith: That was just the attitude.

01-01:26:36
Wilmot: He didn't have anyone helping him edit.

01-01:26:38
Smith: No, no. That was just the attitude. So, it was remarkable. That makes Bill Hewlett, Steve Bechtel just remarkable people, you know, and the other top industry people. But—

01-01:26:59
Wilmot: When I asked that question about was there a place where the visions didn't match MESA's visions of its industry, I kind of was sparked by that, when you talked about saying, "You have to get the greatest bang for the buck."

01-01:27:18
Smith: Uh, no. He was truly just blown away by all the things that were happening with MESA and was a strong believer. And even after he retired, he continued to come to meetings and participate and contribute as Steve Bechtel's representative until he got sick. But his attitude is: "This is a quality program, and what I like about it is that not only do you have standards, but you have accountability. And you have accountability not only in the area of academics and data and statistics about the program, but also in financial management." That's what he was talking about. And that's what I think is missing today. I think that a lot of that has to do with being in the Office of the President where there's so much money at the university level. MESA has a lot of money, and I'm not sure that the university, which has so many problems and has such an image to maintain, really is doing the kind of financial accountability oversight that they should—you know, that kind of thing.

So the place where there were differences had to do with the fact that the people from either Hewlett-Packard who gave us the money or from the Carnegie Institute, who had given us money, had already given money to this technical program in San Francisco. And so they wanted us to work with them, and they asked that that person—one of

those persons be on our board. So that person—a representative—was on the board and was one of the persons that we always had to counteract in terms of wanting to make MESA more remedial. That was the only time. And he soon—you know, their program just died because it wasn't effective, so we soon did not have to deal with him. We've had other people who wanted us to start a technical program, that is, take students and train them for the two-year training jobs, rather than four-year university degrees. We've had to fight that because MESA started originally because we were not having enough underrepresented minority students with four-year degrees in the math-based fields. So, why should we back off? There were enough students who did not make the standards who went all the way through the program, and either for family reasons, financial reasons, or academic reasons went the two-year route anyway.

So today, we have, anyway—the new administration has expanded anyway to the community colleges, and mostly they've expanded to the community colleges because the community colleges ask for the program. And the community colleges have separate funds from the state to run the program at the community college. In other words, the state legislature asked us to set up programs at the community college level, but those programs are still to help students take two years of academic courses so they can transfer to a four-year college, not to get a two-year degree. So we have had places where we've had to just not agree with people on the board who wanted to see MESA take a different direction.

01-01:32:20

Wilmot: I'm wondering if you would tell me the story of Project 920, that fundraising initiative that came out of MESA in 1983?

01-01:32:39

Smith: 1983. Yeah. By that time, I had retired. But the planning for it had almost all been done prior to my retirement. I was there when we were putting the plan together but was not there when it was implemented, which was interesting. But in 1982, as a result of our discussions at industry advisory board and the statewide board, the board recommended to Bob Finnell that MESA was such a wonderful story that we should formally put together the story and tell it to all of the major decision makers in the state. The question was how to do that. And so they came up with the concept of the leadership conferences and having major industries sponsor a leadership conference—one in the north and one in the south. We would at each of the conferences have representatives from those particular areas, we would have MESA parents, MESA graduates, MESA advisors, MESA industry representatives, MESA administrators—principals or superintendents—and all of them would, at different times during the day, talk about how MESA had impacted their lives.

So we put together a panel for the north and invited everybody—the industry people, the school superintendents, school board members, community leaders in civic affairs or local politicians and state representatives—and we did this presentation. It was divided into sections, maybe in the morning we had the students and the graduates talk, and then we had parents. It was super. The idea was that MESA had a story to tell, and it was doing all these wonderful things, but there are very few people out there who knew what we were doing. Then after that, we did one in the north that was sponsored

by Hewlett-Packard, and we did one in the south that was sponsored by ARCO. The senior vice president of Hewlett-Packard was a keynote speaker, and he later became the CEO of Hewlett-Packard. And in the south, the ARCO senior vice president who was on our industry advisory board. Both of them had been on our industry advisory board; he was the senior vice president when he was on our industry advisory board. He was now the CEO of ARCO, an ardent supporter of MESA, which was rather interesting that two of the senior vice presidents who were selected to work with the industry advisory board for MESA later became CEOs of their own industries. Usually the opposite happens. You know, if you are an up-and-coming administrator or executive in private industry, and you go out and spend time working for minorities, you don't usually get any brownie points for moving up.

01-01:37:18
Wilmot: You became a stepchild.

01-01:37:20
Smith: Right, and the same thing is true at the university. If you are an assistant or an associate professor, so that's why we insisted that the PI always be a tenured professor.

01-01:37:34
Wilmot: Mm. Very wise.

01-01:37:36
Smith: Then the impetus for this came from the CEO of ARCO. He appointed his assistant, who had worked with him all the time that he had been on the MESA industry advisory board, and who was the person who implemented everything that related to MESA, and was sort of his outreach person when they did things for the arts in the LA area. He was the guy who handled everything. So he was the guy who handled everything for MESA, and he was truly a go-getter. I mean, he was the Charlotte Maillard Shultz [laughs] of LA in the sense that he knew how to raise money, and he knew how to organize events that would bring the big players together.

So he's the guy who said, "I will take on the job of raising money." He set the goal of $920,000 from industry. And he just went out and did it, you know. But it was these leadership conferences that had been suggested by industry—members of the industry advisory committee—that kicked it off. It was just super because it was so wonderful to bring all these MESA participants together and have them just talk. What I'm telling you, you could talk to any of these MESA parents or graduates, and they will give you the same answer. It's just remarkable. [pause] So that's it.

01-01:39:49
Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:39:50
Smith: For 920.

01-01:39:51
Wilmot: Why do you think industry was so enthusiastic about MESA?

01-01:40:01

Smith: Well, for the reasons I mentioned, in terms of the representative from Bechtel. I mean, he's a hard-headed businessman, and they need good employees. And the reputation—some of my former students are still working for Bechtel—and when you're sending them employees who are smart and bright and can do the work and they don't have to spend a lot of time remediating them. And it helps them meet their qualifications for federal grants. We were providing a remarkable service, but we were doing it in a way that was almost Republican. It wasn't in the sense that the Republicans are supposed to be so conservative, but they love anything that smells of "bootstraps." And I would never call MESA a "bootstraps" program, but one thing you can say about conservatives is they recognize when you're doing quality work in their areas. They will give you credit for it. Republicans and the Democrats, for the same reasons or different reasons as well as the industry people, like MESA because of our accountability, both financially and in terms of data, and for the quality of the results that we were getting. Industry had put so much money into so many different programs that gave them no results, had failed, or sent them poor quality products. We were producing, as the industry board said, "Quality products for industry." They recognized it, and they funded it, supported it, and still do.

01-01:42:20

Wilmot: I wanted to switch gears a little bit and talk to you about board development of, not your industry board, your board of directors. I wanted to start by asking how did you go about recruiting board members? What were the desirable qualities of your board members?

01-01:42:43

Smith: Again, Bill and Bob—mostly Bob—Bob had gone through all this so much and had learned where all the bodies were buried and mistakes were that made at the national level with NACME and was never able to change that industry. So here he had a chance to mold something from the beginning. So from the beginning, the board of MESA, because it was dealing with inter-segmental campuses, segments of higher learning, and because it was more than the university at Berkeley, from the beginning, they set it up so that the president of the university appointed the members to the MESA board. The MESA bylaws said that the board members would be a certain number from industry. There would be a representative from the state superintendent of education's office, there would be a representative from the University of California, there would be a representative from the state university, there would be a representative from the private universities. So the executive director of the Association of Independent Schools and Colleges has always been on the board—that kind of thing. So there is in the bylaws a list of—

01-01:44:44

Wilmot: Stake holders?

01-01:44:47

Smith: Right, of qualifications for each [inaudible] who would be because of the position they held who would serve on the board.

01-01:44:58

Wilmot: It's interesting because it becomes very political very quickly in some ways.

01-01:45:03
Smith: It never was.

01-01:45:04
Wilmot: No? Okay.

01-01:45:06
Smith: It was never political, really, because all of these were players in helping MESA succeed.

01-01:45:19
Wilmot: I understand.

01-01:45:21
Smith: Yeah. And it was to each of their advantages that MESA succeeds. The only problem we ever had was we had to listen to some of the representatives from the state Department of Education talking about all the other programs they were funding. Then they would start a program themselves and put a lot of money into it and go into the same schools where MESA was. They would be preparing students for college. It never made sense to me, why they didn't—but it was the kind of thing that, "I'm in charge, and I want my own program, I want my own name on this program." So that was the only thing: we've run into that several times. Where people of various campuses or the state Department of Education had started a program, which is seemingly in competition with MESA in the sense: "All right, we have a program called UCO. University—something— Opportunity Program. We're putting a million dollars into this program, and it's going to be at schools that have a high percentage of underrepresented minority students." Well, that's going to be where MESA is. So all we did was say to our directors, "UCO is coming into your school. They have a lot of money to pay for tutors after school. Partner with them." Our attitude was, "Never try to duplicate what someone else is putting money in. Just bring them into the fold, and let them pay for the tutors. Call it UCO/MESA or MESA/UCO at that school." So the school doesn't get the attitude that we're all fighting each other for the same schools, for the same students. If we're already there, the students who want to go to college who are underrepresented students are already participating in MESA. So what are they going to do? So we just said—that's what we did. [laughs]

01-01:47:50
Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:47:58
Smith: Well, you know, in the long run, what we did was convince the university that their outreach program should be more like MESA. And that's what they have become. The Partnership Program, which was the flagship program for outreach to the preschools in the state, this year was not even funded by the universities. They put all of their money into MESA as their lead program. It had to do with the fact that they didn't have the same standards; they didn't have the same accountability and were just kind of a show-and-tell. But they got huge amounts of money from the university that we never got. Our money came from the state legislature as a separate line item, thanks to Theresa Hughes and Vasconcellos and the people who really supported MESA and actually gave it to the university and said this is for MESA. Then the other outreach programs performed so poorly that the university kept cutting and cutting their budget until finally

they cut it out, because the money they were getting was for MESA. And they simply put all their money into MESA.

The sad thing is that one of the finest programs in the country for the university level-type program for underrepresented minorities, which is the Professional Development Program that Uri was one of the lead persons on and then made it his primary work. The Professional Development Program, which ran full academic summer sessions as MESA did, but they tested students into the program—they took the top 3 percent, as I had mentioned—never got any support or money from Berkeley or the university. We took on—we recognized it as the perfect model for all of our students, any student, working with students to teach them good study habits and particularly for studying in sciences, which have always been collaborative in their efforts. So we now use the PDP model, but I don't even know that there's a PDP program at Berkeley. When Uri got the MacArthur Genius Award, he was at the University of Texas at Austin. So they get the credit. He runs around the country from the University of Texas. So—unfortunately.

01-01:51:32

Wilmot: I wanted to ask you a question, because your work and your professional life have been focused on higher education and access—increasing access to minorities and persons from disadvantaged backgrounds to higher education. What perspective do you have on the universities, UC Berkeley, and actually the University of California? Over the years, what has their commitment been or looked like, in your opinion, to diversity and access at the college level?

01-01:52:10

Smith: Well, before Prop. 209, it was outstanding, in terms of admissions. At the time Norvel was there, he was over at admissions and financial aid for a while, the whole attitude of the people who ran those departments was one of support and help and access. If I had a student that I felt could make it at Berkeley, had good study habits and a commitment to work hard, I would always write their letter of recommendation myself for their package. I'm sure that had—almost anyone I would recommend would be admitted. I thought the attitude of the chancellor and the administration at Berkeley during the years I was at Tech was always one of welcoming any program that would help to get—

01-01:53:41

Wilmot: Through 1978?

01-01:53:43

Smith: Right. And even after that. The question was how to find a way to make it work under Prop. 209. So I've never doubted the commitment of the staff and the Berkeley campus administration in terms of their sincerity for outreach and diversity. They've always gone the last mile with everybody I've recommended, not only to get them there, but to keep them there. The students who didn't make it, didn't make it for a lot of different reasons that were not necessarily the university's fault because they were not set up to deal with maybe some of the problems the students had. When the MESA university program started, which as I said was only in the engineering department, then a lot more students were helped to graduate from the university in engineering. Of course, they came from the MESA programs all over the state. That was very helpful because one of

the things—if you recall when you were in college and students who were successful if they look back on it—one of the things that helps you get through college is the fact that you have a group of peers you study with and work with and associate with in your field of study who help you through the system—you study together. And if you're the only one in engineering, in thermodynamics, the chances are there's nobody in that class who will study with you if you're black, you see. So, by having a MESA program and having a university MESA program, then there was a place a black student or a Latino student could go to get help to study with somebody who had had that course who was willing to work with them and help them.

I think the faculty had to be dragged kicking and screaming into—and as you read in the paper there, a substantial number of the university faculty thinks that any person of color who walks into their class is underqualified and not able to pass it. They're not committed to diversity. So if you get a student who's really smart and good and wants to study in that field, the only way they can get through is to be confrontational with the professor because he doesn't want them there and lets them know it right away.

01-01:57:05
Wilmot: I wanted to go back to your early years with MESA when you were at Oakland Tech. I wanted to ask you your favorite memory or your favorite field trip or MESA activity. You can name more than one if you want.

01-01:57:35
Smith: I can tell you my worst nightmare [laughs].

01-01:57:38
Wilmot: Okay.

01-01:57:40
Smith: Probably my favorite trip was one of the first ones we took to Chevron. Since it was a first field trip and we were new—I hadn't gone with the students before, because I, you know, avoided those things—as a teacher in high school, I had never taken a group on a field trip—the one at Chevron headquarters, that I mentioned. The behavior of the students, the reaction of the Chevron executives to the students was very gratifying. It was just an all-around positive experience, because it showed them what these kids could do. And they came from North Oakland—they were not necessarily two-parent homes, parents, probably most of them had never finished college or gone to college. Some hadn't finished high school, and yet these students had been able to achieve already before they got to Tech. Then what we did was keep them going. It was wonderful to see how they blossomed intellectually and in self-confidence. That was shown there.

But then two years later, they really did me in when I took them to Pleasanton to the Kaiser Industries Research Area, where I had a friend who worked there. They had a wonderful field trip, and they were well behaved. And then, at the end of the field trip, before the employees came to the employees' cafeteria, they told the students they could go in and eat anything they wanted to. [laughs] So they went in, and they were presented with all this wonderful food, and they could take anything they wanted to, and they piled their plates high. Then they would go sit down and taste the food and say, "Oh, I don't like that," and they'd go back and get more. And I'm standing here trying

to handle this without getting really nasty in front of everybody. And then, they leave all this food on their trays. Then the employees come in, and the cafeteria runs out of food, I hear. [laughs] And oh, I was so mad at them—I never, ever forgave them. I let them know it on the bus. But that was a class that I could not wait until they graduated because they were just a very bright, remarkable group. They'd come up through gifted programs, and they thought they knew everything. But they've done well. But I was so mad at them.

01-02:01:13
Wilmot: They were hard on you that day.

01-02:01:14
Smith: They were hard on me every day. [laughs] All the time. But you know, it was a friendly give and take. But I was really mad at them that day. So that's it.

01-02:01:29
Wilmot: Okay. I wanted to ask you also, you were teaching at Oakland Tech when Oakland was flushed with black power among consciousness and the black power movement. I wanted to ask what that was like for you; what that was like for Oakland Tech, more specifically?

01-02:01:52
Smith: For me it was fun. [laughs] It was interesting. For a lot of people, it was scary, because some of the Oakland Tech students were the ones that marched on Sacramento with shotguns. And a couple of them were in my geometry class.

01-02:02:15
Wilmot: Who was that?

01-02:02:16
Smith: The Harrisons. The Harrison brothers. These are quiet students, brothers—two of them. They both got As or Bs in geometry, they did their homework and were always polite, well behaved. Their parents were lovely people. But they were so funny because they were also the guys who—they started the Black Students' Union at Tech. They had a black teacher who was one of the ones who was very active in protest movements. She taught English, and she was their sponsor for a while. I don't know what happened. But then in order to hold meetings on school grounds, they have to have a teacher at the meetings. And when she couldn't be there, since the Harrisons were in my class, they asked me if they could meet in my class, which meant I had to stay after school and sit there and listen to their—[laughs]—you know—protests. And it was always interesting. Then I had to buy "the little red book," you know—the—I still have it—[laughs]—for a dollar. They were selling them, and they were my students.

01-02:04:20
Wilmot: It sounds like you were very fond of them.

01-02:04:22
Smith: Oh yeah. So the Black Students' Committee or Union or whatever they were met in my class sometimes. Then a lot of the principals and some of the teachers were intimidated by them. But they never bothered me because we talked, and I just said, "Whatever you

do, you have your geometry lessons there, you have your outline, you know what you're supposed to do. Just do your homework and pass your tests and attend class." And that's what they did.

01-02:05:15

Wilmot: It must have been a really exciting time to be teaching at Oakland Tech.

01-02:05:18

Smith: Well, it was interesting because the students at Berkeley were marching up and down Telegraph Avenue every day, protesting the Vietnam War and having sit-ins at the Oakland Induction Center. We were just carrying on school as usual. And you know, this kind of thing is what the students protest against: "The world is going to hell in a handbasket, and we're just sitting here doing what we always do. Nobody's talking to us about this." So they want to talk about things like this. They had good social studies and English teachers, some of them, who would discuss current affairs with them. But I didn't think it was appropriate in math. So I say, "Fine—outside, but—."

Some of them who were in the black studies group, Black Students' Union, would, once in a while they'd be in my class, and that was when I had the pre-Tech programs. So some of the boys in that program were always trying to get my goat on something. They would come in and say, "Oh, Mrs. Smith. You're just bourgeois." And I would say, "Yes, I worked really hard for that. I went to college, and I got my degree. And I've been a teacher for a long time. And yes, I drive a good car, and I live in the hills. But maybe someday, if you work hard, you can do that too."

The thing that's interesting is that a lot of these students were protesting the fact that nobody ever really taught them anything about black history or the accomplishments of blacks, or the black heroes, or really talked about slavery and its effect on people. It was like, all of a sudden: "I want to know this, and nobody's telling me," and they got mad. I had always known it because that wasn't true of the way I was brought up. Because my parents always talked about those things, and of course, we visited our grandparents in Alabama. We visited the farm, and we went to the South, all the time in the years we were growing up. Every year, Dad would go down. But once in a while, he would take us. So we knew all about that. We knew there were black doctors and lawyers and accountants in segregated South. We knew there were black colleges and black professors because my relatives taught at those colleges and attended those colleges and graduated from them. So there was nothing that the black power movement could teach me about what blacks could do or accomplish. It was disturbing, in a sense, that these young people never had the opportunity I had to learn about themselves.

Then my way of working with that—it came out as a result of Norvel's involvement at the Oakland Museum. He was on the Oakland Museum Association Board back in 1968 when they were building the new museum, which had been paid for by bonds that Oakland citizens had voted. Then he found out that there weren't any black professionals working at the Oakland Museum. This resulted in my involvement at the museum, once we started the guild, then I became active with the black history committee of the guild and started working on programs that helped to promote black history and culture. And I felt that was a way to reach young people, rather than marching in the streets. "If there's something you need to know, let's learn it. Let's get

it out there in front of the public." And it was out of that, doing programs that dealt with black history and culture, it was out of that—that Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame, and stuff.

So the black power movement at Oakland Tech was interesting in that it raised the consciousness of the black students about who they were, instead of being beaten down by the system and always being told they couldn't do certain things. "They shouldn't go to college. You're not going to succeed in college." Or being sidetracked by counselors who were putting them in easier courses. Some of them really stepped up to the plate and used it to learn more about their history. Therefore, if you like yourself, you're going to work harder to achieve academically and professionally.

01-02:11:36

Wilmot: Were you at Oakland Tech when Martin Luther King was assassinated?

01-02:11:42

Smith: I was there when we had our first riot, and that was it. And that was the result of another stupidity on the part of the school administrators. Martin Luther King was assassinated. I heard about it after school as I was driving to do my weekly shopping at Co-op. The next morning, I went to school and found out that the students were upset because no memorial service—nothing had been planned by the school to take note of this. So the students decided that they would hold their own memorial service at the football field in the stands.

And then, when that was over, the students who were the leaders in that, who were part of the black students movement, just marched through the school, opened the doors, and said, "School's out." That's it. Some of the ones who were not the leaders just acted crazy and started hitting people and breaking things. So it's a horrible thing to be in the middle of it. And, you know, I'm in a classroom with a whole bunch of students, at least half of them white or Asian or foreign students, who haven't a clue as to what's going on. Unfortunately, I'm right on the first floor facing Broadway. The noise in the hall is just deafening. You have all this loud noise, and you hear banging. So they bang on your door, open it, and say, "School's out." And of course, it was somebody I knew. It's not a matter of being frightened, personally. So, what I said to my students, "Okay, go home right now. Just gather your stuff up and go. And go out the window," [laughs] because they could just step out the window onto the ground at Tech in the front where I was. So we just opened the window, and I said, "Just go. And go in that direction. Don't go in this direction." And so they did, and none of them were bothered. But after that, a lot of them never came back. A lot of the white students never came back to Tech. And then we had another one later on. But it's not anything that's fun.

01-02:14:55

Wilmot: Was there overlap between the black students' group and the Black Panthers? Were they somehow connected or informed by each other?

01-02:15:05

Smith: Yes. The students who marched to Sacramento were the leaders in forming the black students union group. Some of them were Panthers, and some of them were not. Some of them were just activists. They just decided that the system was not treating them well, and they were going to take charge and speak up. Well, this scared the heck out of

a lot of teachers, and particularly the principal. We had a terrible principal at that time. He was so scared that he just went and hid in the closet. The janitor said, "I was walking around opening closets and there was Jim Crase hiding in the closet."

01-02:16:03
Wilmot: That's a very funny story.

01-02:16:05
Smith: Oh gosh, it was.

01-02:16:08
Wilmot: What kind of reaction was there on Tech's campus when Malcolm X was assassinated?

01-02:16:17
Smith: None, nothing. Because he was—let's see. Malcolm X was assassinated before the black power movement got started, as I recall. When Norvel went to Merritt, he invited—Alex Haley's book on Malcolm X had just been published, and that was before Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. He invited—Alex Haley lived here—.

Anyway, he invited Alex Haley to speak and talk about his book *Malcolm X*. And Malcolm had been shot by that time. Malcolm X sort of became famous among the young people after he was shot. Before that, he wasn't.

01-02:17:50
Wilmot: I understand. I don't think I'd realized that.

01-02:17:52
Smith: Yeah. And then Alex spent most of the time talking about what he was doing in researching his background. So the students were disappointed because they wanted to hear about Malcolm X. It took a little while for them to say, "What is going on? We can't just sit here and take this."

01-02:18:26
Wilmot: What was your perspective on the different events that were unfolding at Merritt College while your husband was president there?

01-02:18:45
Smith: Originally, when he went there, it was really fun, because I could tell my students that I knew were enrolling there that my husband was president, and they should speak to him and let him know that they had been my students. I also told them that they should study hard and do well, that kind of thing. A couple of times—Norvel was very anxious to integrate the faculty, because this is one of the things the students were protesting at Merritt. So if a position came up, then he would actively look for people of color to fill those positions. And a couple of times, he would talk to me about the fact that there was nobody in business, was there anybody at Tech who might be interested who would be good? I recommended Norma Tucker, who later became president of Merritt. She was the head of the business department at Tech. Then another time, they needed a drama teacher, and we had a wonderful drama teacher at Tech, Ron Stacker Thompson, that I recommended. Then Ron became the founder of the Oakland Ensemble Theatre with the help of the faculty at Merritt, and has gone on to bigger and better things. He's now

teaching at Wake Forest [University], I think. That was fun. Then, when there were student protests as a result of the fact that the new campus was opening and the sit-ins started, then that was scary. Because we had twenty-four-hour police surveillance at our house, and I had to stay home from school.

01-02:21:13
Wilmot: That was hard.

01-02:21:15
Smith: Oh, I enjoyed it. A vacation for nothing! [laughs] No, I was never worried about Norvel because he often had policemen with him. They had plainclothes policemen with him much of the time. The students were never violent against him, really. It was just that he had to take certain actions that were required by law, that he had no choice. As head of the college, if he didn't, he could be prosecuted. But it was kind of scary, you know. You hear a deer walking in the back, and you call the policeman outside and say, "Somebody's out there!" He'd have to come, he came, and with his searchlight and search the back. I mean, things that are normal sounds then become magnified. Somebody threw something at the house, and he had to chase them. It was probably a college student who had drunk a beer and just threw the can out the window, which they do. [laughs] This guy was so scared! That kind of thing.

01-02:22:39
Wilmot: For the last leg of our interview, I wanted to focus on your commitments now, the kind of work that you do now with the Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame and the Oakland Museum. One thing that struck me is that you said, "I focus on the things where I'm an expert, or where I am very focused is education." And I was wondering then about education at the Oakland Museum, because I know they have this very active education department.

01-02:23:19
Smith: Yes, and the reason why I still work at the Oakland Museum is because the original head curator of the education department, Ben Hazard, was the one that we insisted the museum hire. He stayed at the museum for almost ten years, and now he's head of cultural arts for the city of Oakland, which is wonderful for us.

01-02:23:50
Wilmot: Yeah.

01-02:23:52
Smith: But they have not ever—currently, there is no person of color in a leadership position, in any position, at the museum. In a way it's gone backwards, it's kind of disappointing. The education department is really reaching out and trying very hard to deal with diversity, and they do a pretty good job. They do a good job. But they still are not comfortable with it, is my feeling. And they still don't get it, particularly when it comes to the black community. When we worked, when Ben Hazard was there, when we worked with education, the Asians, the Latinos, the American Indians, and the black Americans were all part of the same committee—guild. And then, under the leadership of the guild, we would outreach to each of our communities. So we had a black history committee, an Asian history committee, an American Indian committee, and a Latino committee. These were headed by representatives from those communities, and they would talk to their own communities and say, "This is the kind of program we'd like to

see at the museum, okay?" But we would all work together on the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild Steering Community.

Now, the museum has a separate Latino advisory committee that never meets with the African American advisory committee or the Asian advisory committee. They have low-level persons of color working with them, but nobody in a decision-making position. So, yes. And they have taken over the black history programs that we used to do, so they do a big to-do about black history in February and about Kwanza, which is good. It's institutionalized now, you know, so it's expected that they do this, and they have the resources and the outreach to the schools to make it work. They also do that with the Latino and the Asian programs. In that sense, the legacy that we started is, in a way we could say, institutionalized. But more than that, the Oakland Museum has become the flagship for diversity for the entire country when it comes to diversity. It was the result of what we did with the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild.

01-02:27:03

Wilmot: Do you mean diversity in terms of its presentations and exhibits?

01-02:27:07

Smith: Yes, and also its outreach to the community. Because traditionally, museums were lily white and upper-middle class and did very little to do outreach to poorer communities, disadvantaged communities, or communities of color. Because their assumption was: "This is our thing and our art, and they're not interested." If you were a black artist, you didn't get exhibited in the major museums, or if you were a Latino artist. So that's what I think a wonderful legacy of what we did back in the seventies at the Oakland Museum and why I still stay there, and also that's where Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame started, as one of our black history programs that we started. So when we incorporated, it became a nonprofit. Then I continued to work with both the museum and Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame so that we would not lose that linkage and that history together.

01-02:28:15

Wilmot: Would you describe your current participation on the Oakland Women's Board of the Oakland Museum?

01-02:28:20

Smith: The Oakland Women's Board is like another guild at the Oakland Museum. You could say it's almost like Black Filmmakers' Hall of Fame. In other words, it started as part of the Oakland Museum Association, as one of the committees. And they came up with the idea of raising money for the Oakland Museum by doing a white elephant sale. And so they started forty-three years ago with a white elephant sale, which last year grossed over a million dollars for the first time. I was the co-chair of that sale, which was exciting, because I remember back in the days when I was working with the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild where the women's board was not that supportive of what we were doing in the black community and the Latino community. I worked with all of these people on the Oakland Museum Association Board because, for a while, I chaired the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild. The chairs of all the guilds sat on the Oakland Museum Association Board. So I knew a lot of the founders.

[Minidisc 4]

00:00:04
Wilmot: Regarding the Oakland Museum—?

00:00:06
Smith: While I was working with the Cultural and Ethnic Affairs Guild, Norvel was the first chair, but he resigned after the first three years from the committee and went on to other things. He was elected to the Oakland Museum Association Board, so he also knew some of these women and made friends with them. They invited me to work with them on certain projects. After a while, they invited me to be one of the volunteers at the white elephant sale. Then after a while, in 1992, twenty-two years later, they nominated me to be on the Oakland Museum Women's Board, which is quite a process for selection. They have a whole committee that reviews you, and you have to be recommended by a couple life members and all that kind of stuff. And your commitment has to be to the museum and volunteering at the white elephant sale. So you really have to put in that time. So then I was nominated to be a member, which is interesting because of the museum, the women's board eventually incorporated, and now they control how their money is spent. Instead of raising money, just turning it over to the Oakland Museum Association, which no longer exists, now we raise the money and have the museum show us the projects they need money for. We decide which ones we want to fund, and then we give them the money for that. That's one of the interesting things about being on the women's board. That's all the women's board does—raise money for the museum and then give oversight to the spending of that money for museum projects. And that's all they've done.

00:02:23
Wilmot: My understanding is that Oakland Museum Women's Board has historically been predominantly white women.

00:02:28
Smith: Still is.

00:02:30
Wilmot: Still is? How do you kind of move an agenda that includes broadening the museum's exhibits and diversifying the kind of work that is shown there and also the staff? How do you move an agenda like that?

00:02:47
Smith: Diversifying the museum's exhibits is not a problem. It's just the staffing that's a problem. They've brought in, finally, a woman as a research assistant, who's an experienced museum person, who's a black woman. She's worked in museums in the South and on the East Coast. She will be good, but she's probably the highest-ranking black person there. They have another black person who works with exhibits, putting up exhibits and doing some of the media work, who's been there for twenty years. But it will come, hopefully. I vote. [laughs] But it's the museum's job—we don't tell the museum what exhibits to do. They're professionals. But their commitment is to diversity because first of all, that's our national reputation, and secondly, they're the Oakland Museum of California, and California's history is diversity. If they deal with California history, they have to deal with Mexican Americans, and they have to deal with blacks. They have to deal with the Asians.

00:04:15
Wilmot: My last question for you today is about the Mary P. Smith Award at MESA. How did that come to be, and what is it for?

00:04:25
Smith: Well, when I retired, Bill Somerton and Bob Finnell got together and decided to name an award for me called the Mary Perry Smith Award. That goes to the outstanding MESA advisor in the state. So every year at the MESA advisors conference, I hand out the Mary Perry Smith Award to the outstanding pre-college secondary school advisor who's been selected by a committee of the board, which I sit on. They are recommended by their centers. And first of all, they have to meet certain qualifications in terms of having been a MESA advisor for at least three years and run an outstanding program and made contributions to help their peers in the MESA program. That's wonderful.

00:05:25
Wilmot: And a cash award?

00:05:27
Smith: It used to be. But the current administration, I don't know what—they just give plaques out now.

00:05:33
Wilmot: Okay.

00:05:35
Smith: Don't ask me. [laughs]

00:05:37
Wilmot: Well, I feel that I have many more questions for you Mary, but I think we'll close for now. I'll get your transcript to you in probably about three to four months. So thank you very much for your time. I had a great time talking to you.

00:05:51
Smith: Yeah, it's wonderful. I enjoyed every minute of it. I love talking about MESA [laughs].

00:05:55
Wilmot: It shows.

00:05:57
Smith: And I thank you for asking.

00:06:00
Wilmot: Okay.

Mary's last day at work. MESA staff retreat at Asilomar, September 3, 1983.
(L-R) Professor Wilbur Somerton, MESA founder; Mary with plaque; Robert Finnell,
MESA's first exectutive director for the statewide program.

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